

A DOUBLE CONQUEST

BY
H. Y. DAWBARN

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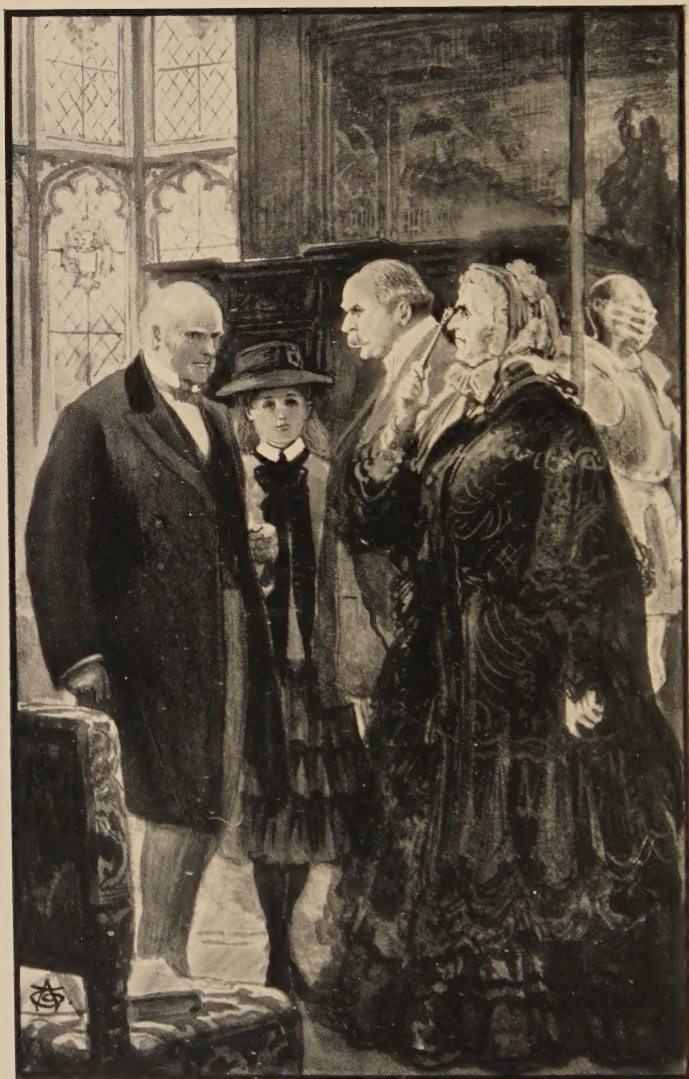
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A DOUBLE CONQUEST

A STORY OF SIXTY YEARS AGO



SHE CAME FACE TO FACE WITH GRANDFATHER, HER FACE BECAME
LIVID, AND HER DARK EYES LITERALLY FLASHED FORTH FIRE.

(see p. 41.)

[Frontispiece.]

A DOUBLE CONQUEST

A STORY OF SIXTY YEARS AGO

BY

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London

CHARLES H. KELLY

25-35 CITY ROAD, AND 26 PATERNOSTER ROW, E.C.

FIRST EDITION . . . 1910

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A DOUBLE CONQUEST

CHAPTER I

WHERE MEMORY LINGERS

CHARLIE and I, his sister Kate, are Dr. Leigh's grandchildren. Charlie was born in 1856, fourteen months before I entered the world. Our parents died when we were still in our babyhood, but their place was so fully supplied by our grandparents that we never realized our loss. We lived at Charnham, a pretty little town in one of the eastern counties of England, in a house which the colour of the oaken staircase and wainscoting alone certified to be ancient.

It was large, square, and substantially built, totally unlike the mushroom villas of the present day, and stood back a little way from the road in a delightful garden. Its front windows overlooked the swift tidal river Charne, on whose yellowish-brown waters came and went an endless procession of boats and barges, which provided an unfailing source of interest for us. The nursery well deserved our appreciation and affection. It extended from the front of the house to the back, the large windows at either end rendering it very airy, and in summer causing the room to be flooded with sunshine for the greater part of the day. With characteristic prudence grandmother had selected the

topmost story as the most natural position for our quarters. At that altitude we might romp about and shout to our hearts' content without the slightest fear of disturbing the peace of the household below.

Equal shrewdness had been displayed in the choice of our nurse, a pleasant-looking young woman, a second 'Peggotty'; the kindest, most faithful, good-natured guardian that ever little children were blessed with. Indeed, so happy did she make us that, though at all times pleased to be summoned to walk, drive, or sit with grandmother, we were just as glad when the time came to return to the nursery.

We saw very little of our grandfather in these early days, for we were kept out of the way lest we should disturb him. What made him suspect such an arrangement I know not; but the moment he realized it he insisted on our taking meals with him and coming downstairs more frequently. Besides this he often invited us into his surgery—as a country practitioner he dispensed his own medicines—and we watched him compound pills, fill bottles, and carry out other operations that passed our comprehension. Yet, although he was so kind to us, we stood very much in awe of him, until a time came when we learned to know and love him as much as we did our indulgent grandmother.

One morning I had been for a walk with grandmother, and as we re-entered the house we heard the dinner-bell ringing; so we hastily doffed our out-door things, for grandfather was a great lover of punctuality. When we entered the dining-room we found him looking very impatient; grandmother, therefore, seated herself at the table at once, and, like the wise woman she was, attempted no explanation, for next to unpunctuality her husband detested excuses.

I sat opposite Charlie, and was struck with his radiant aspect—he looked so perfectly satisfied with himself. We had been trained to refrain from interrupting our elders' conversation at table, but to-day Charlie had something of such importance to tell that he would not be repressed. At first he began in a whisper, 'Grannie, dear! I have been such a good boy this morning!' She shook her head at him to keep quiet, but in vain; he rushed on to his doom. 'And oh, grannie!' he continued, speaking more loudly in his excitement, 'I have been in the library all by myself, rubbing some dirty little glasses quite clean as we did yesterday with grandfather, and I have not broken the littlest piece!' Here he displayed in triumph a soiled handkerchief.

'What is that you are saying, Charlie?' asked Dr. Leigh, in a startled voice.

'Why, grandfather,' he replied, pleased at last to have attracted his notice, 'I have been helping you ever so much, rubbing up little bits of glass like I did yesterday.'

In a moment grandfather had risen from his chair, and though his movements were generally slow, on this occasion he almost rushed into the library. In a minute or two he came back even more quickly than he went, and in indignant tones commanded: 'Go to bed this moment, you bad boy! How dare you touch my things! Send nurse for him at once; he shall have only bread and water for his dinner.'

Charlie put down his knife and fork, pushed back his chair, and said angrily, 'You are a bad old man yourself! I don't love you one bit. Nurse needn't come for me—I can go to bed by myself'; and he marched out of the room, looking a picture of injured dignity.

'And now,' said the doctor, 'come and look what that wretched boy has done.'

Grandmother rose with a troubled expression on her face, and accompanied him to the library. Crying bitterly, I crept after them to see what awful iniquity Charlie had perpetrated. Had I seen everything in the room smashed to atoms it would scarcely have surprised me, but not even a chair was out of place ; books, microscopes, and everything else looked in perfect order.

Grandfather walked straight to a table in the window, took up a little oblong piece of glass, and held it up to the light. It was, as Charlie had said, 'beautifully clean.' One after another of these carefully polished slides he showed us. 'See,' he said, 'that wretched child has destroyed the result of months of laborious and patient investigation. It is almost impossible for me to replace these specimens.' Then he added, in a tone of the deepest dejection, 'Leave me—I cannot return to the dining-room.'

I had no sympathy with his sorrow, for I was very angry at his speaking so harshly to Charlie, and I could not then understand what mischief his active fingers had so unwittingly done. Now, however, I am wiser, for grandfather used the microscope largely in investigating certain causes of disease, and he was engaged in preparing specimens from a most interesting case. These specimens he had left incautiously on the library table when he went his morning rounds—a ready prey for the busy fingers of Charlie.

Grandmother's appetite had vanished too, and as I was longing to go to Charlie, our unhappy meal was soon concluded. Feeling instinctively that she was not angry with the culprit, I said boldly, 'Grannie, dear, I am going to see Charlie. Won't you come too? He didn't mean to be naughty.'

'My darling,' she answered, 'I know he did not mean

to do wrong, but he has given your grandfather great pain, and I cannot go and see him after the very undutiful conduct he displayed. But you may go.'

Hurrying upstairs, I found Charlie in bed, so I climbed up, nestled down beside him, and putting my arms round his neck, did my utmost to console him.

He was not crying, but he was still very angry and somewhat mystified. 'I rubbed them so clean,' he said, showing me his stained pocket-handkerchief, which he still kept in his hand. 'Isn't he a nasty, cross old thing? Don't you hate him? I do!' Here we heard slow, stately footsteps on the stairs.

'Oh, Charlie!' I said, beginning to cry again, 'suppose he's coming to punish you.'

'Don't be a silly. He can if he likes.'

A short pause at the door, and then the handle slowly turned, and in walked grandfather. I gave a little scream, but Charlie sat up and faced him boldly as he advanced to the foot of the bed.

Grandfather appeared unable to speak at first, but when words came they were indeed different from those we had anticipated. 'Charlie, my dear boy! get up this instant. I ought to be in bed instead of you. I have been the naughty one, and—yes—I am very sorry I spoke so harshly to you, and I ask your pardon.'

In a moment Charlie had sprung out of bed and had flung his arms round the doctor's neck. The tears rolled down his cheeks as he sobbed out, 'I'm—I'm so sorry for calling you bad; I do love you, and I'll never, never rub the little glasses any more!'

There were tears, too, on grandfather's face, but he spoke quite cheerfully. 'Come, my child, jump up and dress as quickly as you can; and if you ever do wrong

again, confess it, and you may still profit by your old grandfather's example to-day.'

Then he came and lifted me from the bed, called me a dear little comforter, and when Charlie was ready we all went down together. Grandmother's face beamed when she saw us. Without asking a question she seemed to know that all was right again; and as we gathered round the dinner-table and did full justice to the untasted dainties, I heard grandfather say to her, 'Helen, love, "The idols He shall utterly abolish!" I have set my heart too much on these things.'

She whispered something deprecatingly, but he shook his head and replied, 'No, there was something I was nearly erasing, far more precious than my cherished specimens—that boy's affection for me. But, thank God, He has shown me my mistake, I trust, in time.' He laid his hand affectionately on my brother's shoulder, and Charlie in return slid his small hand into grandfather's larger one, and would hardly leave his side all day. From that time our dread of grandfather departed, and the most tender confidence existed between us.

CHAPTER II

CREEDS AND CHRISTIANS

Strange all this difference should be
'Twixt tweedledum and tweedledee.

BYRON.

CHARNHAM was a small market town containing about twelve thousand inhabitants. Its streets were narrow and lined with old-fashioned houses, whose dormer-windows, gable-ends, and tiled roofs were much admired by lovers of the picturesque. Well worthy of note, too, were the quaint market-place, the ancient parish church, and the old stone bridge that spanned the river. The bulk of the population were tradesmen, who supplied the wants of the farmers and labourers belonging to the neighbouring agricultural districts. In addition there were the clergy, bankers, doctors, lawyers, and retired business men, who considered themselves the aristocracy of the place.

Even this self-constituted 'upper ten' was split into many cliques; and as there was also the usual amount of professional jealousies, heart-burnings, and bickerings incidental to the life of a country town, 'Society' as represented by these circles was often in a sorry plight. Occasionally scarcely enough people willing to meet each other could be mustered to form a respectable dinner-party.

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But on one point these different sets cordially agreed: they all alike considered Dissenters vulgar, they rigorously excluded them from their visiting-list, and so far as circumstances permitted ignored their very existence. Disgraceful as these religious squabbles were, at any rate the Nonconformists had some excuse for resentment; they had in bygone years been banned from official posts; and because they could not conscientiously pay Church rates their houses had been forcibly entered, and their plate and furniture distrained upon. The sore caused by such petty persecutions had not yet had time to heal; and as the priestly party professed themselves shocked beyond measure by their adversaries' rebellion to constituted authority and their utter want of Christian humility, the strife continued, each side holding up its hands in pious horror at the other's depravity.

When I was about six years old, a new vicar, Dr. Brown, was appointed to the living of Charnham. No one could have supposed that he was destined to assuage the bitterness of party spirit, for he was a man of strong prejudices, and even prided himself on possessing them. His attachment to the Established Church was of the same patriotic stamp as that of the ordinary Englishman towards his native land; he loved her blindly, her faults as much as her virtues.

Fortunately, he was a man of large heart and quick sympathy, and his kindness of disposition often led him to do generous acts to people whose opinions he detested; but these very acts he afterwards sorrowed over as sins. His life, therefore, was full of inconsistencies, for though no previous vicar of Charnham had ever indulged in such strong language against Dissenters, never had any vicar before shown such kind-

ness to them when prostrated by sickness or poverty. Naturally this conduct tended to mitigate the angry feelings caused by his fiery denunciations, and made his antagonists remark, 'Brown's bark is worse than his bite.'

Our grandparents took very little interest in these quarrels, for they belonged to a sect of the narrowest type, holding aloof not only from Episcopalians, but from all other Dissenters, and speaking even of professing church members as the 'religious world.'

This community considered its creed perfection, so it necessarily followed that all who differed from them must be in the wrong. They looked upon themselves as the elect and special favourites of the Almighty, and before such august claims all merely social and earthly distinctions sank into nothingness. A man was not judged by his riches, learning, or goodness, but by the purity and orthodoxy of his creed. A servant in this church might possess greater influence than his master, could he but say its 'Shibboleth' more correctly. Consequently, rich and poor would visit each other on an equal footing, the only difference being in the quality of the fare provided at the various houses.

Charlie and I often took tea with our grandparents at the cottages of the milkman, the butcher, or the shoemaker; but there were places where we decided never again to hazard a second cup of tea, for we had beheld to our horror the immersion of our cups in the basin in which the dregs of others had been previously deposited.

Sometimes the tea-table presented a singular appearance, but the most singular I ever saw was one where every dish was garnished, almost to concealment, with

herbs—mint, sage, balm, thyme, and marjoram. At first Charlie and I saw nothing besides these green dainties. He nearly upset my gravity by whispering, ‘What a pity old Solomon isn’t here instead of us. Didn’t he say he preferred a dinner of herbs to roast meat?’ After tea the evenings were spent in the study of the Scriptures and in prayer, the minister usually presiding.

Such social intercourse could not have been possible had there not been a spirit of real comradeship and love among these people. Discipline was sternly observed in moral matters as well as in spiritual. Unless unavoidable misfortune could be clearly proved, a man was always required to pay twenty shillings in the pound. Their marriage laws were also strict, and a member of their church might not marry an unbeliever, nor even one outside the pale of their own membership. No fixed salary was paid to their pastor.

Dr. Leigh did not sympathize with many of the narrow views of his brethren. Though a man of fervent piety, he was regarded by them as little better than a Laodicean, and in consequence was never elected to any office, nor had he the slightest influence in their councils. It was whispered that he had been heard more than once to say that a member of the Established Church might be a true Christian. Such an opinion was regarded with horror, and they shook their heads gravely, sighed deeply, and hoped it was well with the doctor; but they were ‘afraid.’ Here they paused, for after all they did not like to consign him with their adversaries to perdition. But, in spite of their narrowness and bigotry, they were a set of firm, right-living Christians through their constant study of the Bible; and I firmly believe they would have suffered and died if

necessary for their religious principles, so strong within them was the old martyr spirit.

To me the memory of this race of intolerant people is very dear ; I loved and respected them with all my heart, though I could not pretend to justify all their tenets.

CHAPTER III

CASUISTS

NEARLY a year had elapsed since Dr. Brown had been appointed vicar of Charnham, when one afternoon in early autumn Charlie and I received permission to play by ourselves in the spacious garden which surrounded our house.

We amused ourselves for some time by throwing up large sticks at the fruit of a Siberian crab-tree, for our elders, finding the apples too mealy and flavourless for eating, had handed them over to us.

Having collected far more than we could possibly devour, Charlie proposed that we should stand on the large gate at the bottom of the back garden and give them to passers-by. This gate was always kept locked; a wooden bar ran across it, upon which we climbed, and supported ourselves by holding fast to the spikes at the top.

We delighted the hearts of many children on their way home from school as we handed the apples to them; but this form of amusement soon became monotonous, and I suggested that we should throw them, at the backs of people and disappear behind the gate. It would be rare fun hearing what they said!

My brother agreeing willingly enough, we were soon

enjoying the wonder and disgust which our showers of crab-apples called forth.

Charlie now declared he would climb the wall and lie flat on the top, where he would run no risk of being seen, as it was completely overhung by branches of trees. In that way he would see as well as hear, which would mean double the fun.

'We have only a very few apples left,' I replied; 'come and knock down some more.'

'All right, let's use these up first. Hurrah! here's such a solemn party coming along.'

The 'solemn party' came on, unconscious of danger. Charlie gave the signal, and we pitched two great handfuls of our remaining crab-apples into the face and over the shoulders of no less a personage than Dr. Brown, the vicar.

Charlie, alas! in his efforts to put the more force into his throwing, overbalanced himself, rolled over the wall, and fell right at the feet of the astonished and irate vicar, whose face was smarting sorely from the effects of our well-directed missiles.

I climbed on to the bar to see what would happen.

Our victim had a stout stick in his hand, and he looked so flushed and angry that I felt sure Charlie would speedily feel its weight.

'Get up, you young rascal!' he cried, 'and tell me what you mean by playing such tricks on honest folk.'

Charlie picked himself up, but notwithstanding his coating of dust he looked so lovable and innocent, with his golden curls streaming over his forehead, that the doctor was evidently undecided as to his guilt. The more he gazed the more he seemed mystified, and I heard him mutter, 'Such a face is not capable of so mean an action! I must be mistaken.'

'Can you tell me, my boy,' he inquired mildly, 'who threw these detestable things?'

Charlie looked distrustfully at the stick which his interrogator clutched in an alarming manner; but in spite of its terrors he replied boldly, 'I did, sir.'

'Then,' retorted the doctor angrily, 'hold out your hand.'

It was now time for me to interfere. Charlie was not to have all the punishment when I had shared in the fun; so, as Dr. Brown was in the very act of raising his stick, I called out hurriedly, 'Please stop; I threw the apples in your face, which hurt the most. Here's my hand!' And I poked it out as well as I could between the spikes.

'Eh?' said the offended vicar, suspending in mid-air his weapon of chastisement, 'so there's another of you, is there?'

'You can't hit her,' broke in Charlie decidedly; 'she's a girl. Hit me for both of us.'

The stinging pain caused by the apples having doubtless by this time subsided, the doctor burst out laughing. 'I see,' he said, 'the long and the short of it is, I shall have to forgive you both on condition that you promise never to throw these wretched things again at any one.'

We promised cheerfully; and the vicar, putting his hand on my brother's soft curls, asked his name.

'Charlie Leigh. Dr. Leigh's grandson.'

Dr. Brown drew his hand sharply away from my brother's head, and said severely, 'Little heretic, you have begun to assault our church in my person very early!'

'Do you think,' said the 'little heretic,' disregarding these remarks, 'you could give me a leg up over the wall? If I have to go round to the front, I might get

punished, you know.' Charlie laid his small hand in touching confidence on that of the doctor's, which still held the stick.

'What do you mean, boy? Do you suppose I shall help you over that wall, and abet your naughtiness by aiding you to escape punishment?'

'Yes,' said he, tightening his grasp of the vicar's hand and looking confidingly in his face, 'I think you will.'

Charlie's judgement of Dr. Brown's character proved correct. The next moment, hoisted up by strong arms, he had scrambled over the wall. From the top of the gate we bade our generous antagonist good-bye, and thanked him heartily for his kindness.

'All right, children,' he called out, 'remember your promise.' And, nodding good-humouredly, he departed.

The interpretation we put upon that promise, however, is not calculated to inspire me with pride as I recall our subsequent doings. Naturally our ordinary games fell very flat after such an exciting form of amusement, and we soon decided that we might not be held guilty of breaking our word if we substituted split-peas for apples. Armed with these new weapons one morning we returned to our sport. As we reached the gate we saw a market-cart standing opposite, the driver being deeply engaged in conversation with another man.

The horse became very restless with waiting, and when the driver at last gathered up his reins we hastened his departure with handfuls of peas, which struck the animal, and started him off down the road at break-neck pace, the while we stood staring at the sight without a thought of concealing ourselves. The man's

companion caught sight of us, and cried out, 'You two children will have to answer for this business; the doctor shall hear of your goings-on.' Then he ran off at full speed after the horse and cart.

With trembling hearts we waited for some time in the garden; and, the suspense becoming intolerable, we were really thankful when we heard grandfather's voice calling us to come into the house immediately.

The moment we saw his troubled face we knew he had heard about our misdeeds. He listened to what we had to say in answer to his questioning, and then observed gravely, 'That poor man has paid dearly for your amusement; he is lying in the hospital with a broken leg, and the horse has injured itself so severely that it is going to be shot.'

We cried bitterly; and grandfather, after talking to us very severely, sent us upstairs to our rooms for the remainder of the day. This caused us little grief compared with the regret we felt for the harm which we had so thoughtlessly committed.

Of course our guardian took care that the poor man should be at no pecuniary loss through our folly, and Charlie and I visited him so frequently at the hospital that we became firm friends.

Some time after, we were crossing the market-place when we found ourselves face to face with Dr. Brown. He stopped, and said in a harsh voice, 'So, young people, I find you do not consider it necessary to keep your promise! I have heard the story of that man who has just left the hospital.'

We felt terribly ashamed, and Charlie faltered out, 'We did keep our promise to you, sir, for we never threw any crab-apples again, only split-peas.'

'Eh?' said he, 'you are little casuists!'

Then I whispered, 'We're dreadfully sorry, and we're never going to throw anything again at anybody.'

'I'm very glad to hear it,' and he looked at us so forgivingly that we were emboldened to seize the hands he held out. Then, withdrawing them from our clasp, he thrust one into a capacious pocket which jingled with a pleasing sound, and producing two half-crowns he said, 'I know what I loved to buy when I was young. Go in there,' pointing with his stick to a confectioner's close by, 'and get yourselves some lollipops.'

Having been forbidden ever to take money as a present, we sorrowfully refused his gift, telling him the reason. A brilliant idea, however, occurred to me, and I said, 'We mayn't take the money, but you might buy us some sweets with a little of it.'

'Well,' he said, laughing heartily, 'you certainly are the sharpest and most casuistical little creatures I have ever come across! I'll warrant good children who can say the catechism would never have thought of such nice distinctions; but certainly I'll buy the sweets to satisfy your delicate consciences.'

We went into the shop and he bought two large gaily coloured boxes, and told us to choose any goodies we liked to put in them.

They were partly filled, when Charlie exclaimed, 'Please, that is enough; you've given us more than two half-crowns would buy.'

'Ah, my boy, I see you have some conscience left. However, I'm going to have these boxes filled right to the top.'

We modestly chose the most inexpensive sweets, and after thanking him many times, we ran off exultingly to show them to our grandparents.

Arriving home, we found grandfather in the library, and at once displayed our treasures.

After admiring them, he asked a very natural question. 'How is it, children, you know Dr. Brown?'

We blushed and made no reply.

'Come,' he said gently, 'let me hear all about it.'

Having told our tale we asked, 'What did he mean by calling us casuists; are they nice people?'

'No,' said he sternly, the sudden change in his voice and manner frightening us; 'they are people I hold in the utmost contempt, and to think that my grandchildren should deserve such an epithet cuts me to the heart. A casuist, in the sense Dr. Brown applied the word to you, is to my mind little better than a liar, and if you think liar an ugly word it is no uglier than the thing it describes. I would almost rather you had flatly disobeyed me and taken the half-crowns than that you should have acted in this underhand way. Do you not see that even you little children had a power for good in your hands to-day? Dr. Brown has probably never before come in contact with the children of Dissenters. Had you acted as you ought, you must have won his respect; now he sneers at you, and believes you are a sample of all the rest.'

By the time grandfather finished speaking, we were as miserable as children could well be. No doubt we looked so, for he kissed us and said, 'I am afraid I have been talking over your heads, I had no intention of scolding you; you will soon become afraid of me and go for sympathy elsewhere. Come, I'll promise to let you off the next scolding unless you intend to be so good as never to need another. Now run off and enjoy your sweets.'

Enjoy them! that was about the last thing we

could do, and we looked at each other forlornly as we climbed the stairs to the nursery.

‘Charlie,’ I said, ‘let’s take these sweets back to Dr. Brown; he may think better of us then, we’ve only eaten two or three.’

‘All right; but Phoebe will have to come with us.’

Phoebe, however, refused at first, and said there had been fuss enough about such trumpery; but we went on pleading until she gave way; then we set forth for the vicarage.

Nurse knocked at the door, and the maid who opened it seemed astonished at our asking for Dr. Brown when she heard our names.

‘I will go and inquire if master can see you,’ she said doubtfully. But in a minute she returned with the welcome news that he would see us at once.

With beating hearts we followed her to a pleasant room, where the vicar was seated at a table writing.

‘Well, children,’ he asked, in a surprised tone, ‘what is it you want?’

‘Please, Dr. Brown,’ we said, placing the unfortunate boxes close to him on the table, ‘we have brought back your sweets. We would rather not have them; we’ve only eaten a very few.’

‘Why, aren’t they as good as they look?’

‘Oh, they are awfully good!’ answered Charlie; ‘but grandfather does not like our asking you to buy them; he says you can’t respect us.’

‘Well, and who wants to respect bits of children?’

‘Grandfather says children should be respected as much, if they are good, as grown-up people.’

‘Well, why, little man, am I not to respect you and your sister?’

Then we told him how grandfather considered we had

not acted straightforwardly, and this had grieved him very much ; but that now we meant to turn over a new leaf, and so had brought back his present.

When we had finished, he drew us close to him, and putting his arms round us, said, ' Dear children, I do respect you. Tell your grandfather that even on the first day when I made your acquaintance, in spite of your naughtiness, I recognised a truthfulness and affection in you both that won my heart.'

We were delighted at this, and we took an affectionate farewell of him, kissing him repeatedly. He told Phoebe to bring us again soon to visit him ; and with lightened hearts we returned home to tell grandfather about our visit. This time for once we had pleased him.

Next morning, when we entered the breakfast-room, we saw lying by our basins of bread and milk two parcels wrapped in silver paper, which proved on our opening them to be our boxes of sweets once more.

Grandfather laughed at our astonishment, and said that Dr. Brown had sent them with a note, begging as a personal favour that he would allow his grandchildren to accept them as a slight token of his respect and regard. He had already written a reply thanking him for the kindness he had shown us.

Our visit to the vicarage bore good fruit. Before this Dr. Brown had been greatly prejudiced against grandfather merely because he was a Dissenter, but what he had heard from our childish lips impressed him favourably. No longer did he rush from a sick-room when he heard Dr. Leigh's name announced, and henceforth they often met at the bedside of the sick and dying. When the vicar beheld the doctor's unwearied gentleness and patience, his pity for the poor—even the least

deserving of them—and that he made no distinction professionally between Nonconformist and Churchman, Dr. Brown, still hating his creed, loved the man who held it ; and he was not one to love by halves.

The strange intimacy that grew up between them met with the disapprobation of their respective acquaintances, and the vicar, as well as Dr. Leigh, was remonstrated with ; but the only effect of opposition on men of their temperament was to cause them to hold the more closely to each other, undeterred by other people's disapproval. They met, and met again ; and it became a common sight in Charnham to see the two walking arm-in-arm through its narrow streets, a scandal alike to good Churchmen and Dissenters, until at length the very frequency of the occurrence caused it to pass unnoticed. What was more, Dr. Brown did not feel the same liberty in attacking schismatics as he had done previously ; ' sons of Belial ' and other like expressions no longer fell from his lips, now that his own particular friend was involved. Gradually, therefore, a softened feeling crept in between Dissenters and Episcopalians, and the bitterness of party spirit slackened considerably.

CHAPTER IV

A PROPOSAL WITHOUT EMBELLISHMENTS

OUR childhood days flowed peacefully on, till all at once a great trouble came upon Charlie and myself through Phoebe, our devoted nurse.

Every year she had been allowed a fortnight's holiday to visit relatives who lived in the south, where her early life had been spent. When only seventeen years of age, she had become engaged to a neighbour's son, a steady, industrious young fellow. Unfortunately for their happiness, there were people who wished them ill, and succeeded in sowing discord between them. The result was that David Smith, her lover, in a fit of jealousy went off to America, and she, no longer able to endure her usual mode of life, left home and became our nurse.

This year she had paid her annual visit to her friends, but when she returned we found her greatly changed. She would often sit silent, lost in thought, letting her work slip unheeded from the fingers that were usually so busy. Besides this, her temper became erratic; she would give way to unexpected bursts of grief, and now and again she would overwhelm us with passionate demonstrations of affection. We were forced to confess that Phoebe was not a bit like her old self.

One evening I was sitting with my grandparents when

the footman announced that Mr. David Smith—a name unknown to me, though not to them—was waiting outside, and had asked if he could see the ‘doctor and the missus.’

That question having been answered in the affirmative, a nice-looking man of about thirty years of age was shown into the drawing-room. My grandparents greeted him kindly and bade him be seated, saying that they had heard a great deal about him, and were very pleased to have the opportunity of making his acquaintance.

‘I guess I’m real glad to know that,’ he replied, with a strong Yankee accent; and, drawing a chair towards them, he sat down in the most deliberate fashion and continued: ‘Well, sir and marm, it’s no use wasting time by beating about the bush, so I’ll come to the point at once, and I’ll be truly obligated if you see your way clear to help me. I’ve been a widower nigh on two year, and I can’t say the unmarried state suits a chap like me. Somehow I feel more comfortable when a woman’s flying round, even if she happens to be a bit sharp-tempered at times. It’s a fact’—and here he lowered his voice—‘I kinder miss my old woman’s blowings-up, which I never thought to do. Anyway I’m on the look-out for a wife, and I’ve bin trying hard enough in one quarter the last week or two. Will you,’ he inquired earnestly, ‘help me to get her? It’s a “yes” or “no” business, doctor. I can’t hang on no longer—I’m dead tired of it. I can keep her like a lady, for I’ve plenty of money, and I’ve the offer of a good farm down where her people live. It took me nigh on four year after we quarrelled to settle to another young woman, and I calculate if she won’t have me, it’ll take some time again. Will you speak for me a bit to my

old sweetheart?’ And he looked anxiously at his hearers.

Grandmother answered, ‘I think, Mr. Smith, in a case like this, a man had better plead his own cause. My husband and I heartily approve of the match, and we have already tried to persuade Phoebe to give you a favourable answer.’

Phoebe! I pricked up my ears, and cried out angrily, ‘Does this man want to take nurse away?’

‘Yes, child. I am very sorry for you, but must help him as much as lies within my power.’

I burst into a flood of tears, which gave Mr. Smith for the first time an embarrassed manner, and he said apologetically, ‘I’m real sorry for the young lady, and yet I’m a bit pleased too. It’s only right Phoebe should be thought of as she deserves.’

‘Come into the next room, Mr. Smith, and I will send her to you,’ said grandmother.

‘I’d be glad, if you haven’t no objection, to her coming here instead, and answering a plain question. I rather like ’—turning confidentially to grandfather—‘to have somebody by when I’m talking to women. No offence to you, marm. They’ve a trick of forgetting what they’ve promised a man, and you’ll take notice of what she says as well as myself.’

‘I will go and fetch her.’ Then, turning to me, she said decidedly, ‘Katie, you had better go if you cannot stop crying. I do not wish nurse’s feelings towards you and Charlie to be worked upon just now.’

‘I won’t cry,’ I said, ‘and I don’t believe she will leave us to go with a strange man. She has known us much longer than she has him.’

‘No, darling. Phoebe and Mr. Smith were playmates from childhood, and loved each other before you were

born.' She then gave her visitor an encouraging smile and went on her errand.

Nurse's face when she entered the room was quite white. I was about to run to her, but grandfather held me back and gave me a look of warning.

The meeting of these two lovers was a most prosaic affair. Phoebe simply said, 'Well, David, I didn't think to see you down in these parts.'

'Didn't you, lass? Well, you see I'm here,' he replied. Thus did he proceed with his matter-of-fact method of wooing.

'Now, you know, I'm a plain man, and I want just "yes" or "no" to a plain question. I've bin philanthropizing arter you long enough, and I reckon you'll have to make up your mind either way pretty quick. Will you marry me as soon as maybe? If you say "Yes," I'll be the happiest man in the old country or the new; but if you say "No," I'll just pack up my traps and go slick back to the States, and you'll see me no more. Now, old sweetheart, which is it to be, "Yes" or "No"?''

Nurse looked helplessly into the speaker's honest face, which expressed far more love than his words. He gazed into her eyes till they filled with tears, and in the dead silence their hurried breathing became audible.

'Well, lass,' he said hoarsely, 'say out your mind; this sort of thing takes it out of a man.'

She turned her head, and, catching sight of me, exclaimed, 'Oh, David! it must be "No" then. The children need me still, and these arms'—stretching them out towards me pathetically—'have held her since she was a helpless babe. No! it would break my heart to leave her.'

'Phoebe,' said my grandmother entreatingly, 'do not be foolish! You know you love him dearly.'

David Smith turned from nurse and came towards us, staggering like a man who has received a heavy blow ; but though his face was deadly pale he spoke out manfully : ' Thank you, doctor, and you, marm, for all your kindness ; I wish you every good in this world and the next. And for you, little miss, be sure and love her quite well, for her love to you has cost me dear enough.'

He then went up to nurse, put his arms round her, kissed her, and said solemnly, ' Good-bye, old sweetheart ; it's a life-long separation now. Say " God bless you " afore we part.'

Her poor quivering lips tried to frame the words he asked for, but they would not come.

' All right ; I know it's in your heart. And maybe you'll pray a bit for me when I'm t'other side the Atlantic.'

Phoebe seemed to be in a dream as the drawing-room door closed on her lover ; but when the hall door opened and she heard that also close, the conviction came upon her with overwhelming force that she had indeed seen him for the last time. Forgetful of everything but her early love, she rushed to the door, tore it open ; thence to the outer door, which she flung back in like fashion, crying out wildly, ' David ! David ! come back—come back to me !'

He did come back as quickly as a man could the moment he heard her voice. When we went into the hall and found them locked in each other's arms, we modestly retired.

David Smith had won the game. Nurse wept much at leaving her two bairns, but she never wavered again, and the marriage took place as soon as it was possible to arrange it.

My brother and I were broken-hearted for a time, but

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Charlie considered it a manly thing to hide his feelings as much as possible, and betook himself to corners and dark nooks where he could give way to bursts of grief unobserved; while I had the consolation of crying publicly, and of being petted and consoled by the whole household.

CHAPTER V

THE PASSING OF MISS GREGG

AFTER nurse's departure our grandparents decided that Charlie and I needed a resident governess to take charge of us.

For some time past a visiting lady had come daily to teach us the rudiments of knowledge. This was now deemed insufficient, and a new instructress appeared on the scene in the person of Miss Gregg, a stiff spinster of uncertain age and many accomplishments. She was small of stature, but what she lacked in inches she made up by the exceeding dignity of her carriage. Her features were plain and insignificant, but the steady look in her eyes and the thin lips—which displayed, when she smiled, two rows of irreproachable teeth that did credit to her dentist—indicated strong capacity for government.

She was much distressed when she discovered what manner of children we were ; our loud voices and abrupt manners jarred on her nerves, and such remarks as these were of daily, and even hourly, recurrence : ' My dear Miss Katherine, the head and back more erect, if you please, and the feet in the first position.' ' Master Charles, remove those hands from your pockets, uncross your feet, and sit like a young gentleman.' But though we were bored to the last degree by our new governess's

finicking ways, we could not despise her. She ruled us with firmness not devoid of kindness, but the liberty we had enjoyed under nurse's more indulgent sway was now a thing of the past.

Soon after her arrival, Charlie, in an exasperated state of mind and with malice aforethought, upset the ink-bottle over her dress; but she never suspected it was anything but pure accident, and remarked, in all good faith: 'My dear boy, I will not reprove you this time for carelessness, as I am perfectly sure you will regret the spoiling of my dress even more than I can do.' No crafty schemer could have succeeded better than this simple-minded lady in obviating such 'carelessness' for the future.

Directly school was over, Charlie, in a remorseful state of mind, hastened away to confess his misdeeds to grandmother, and to ask her to replace the dress he had injured by another bought out of his own pocket-money. She did as he wished, and when he presented it to Miss Gregg she expressed such delight at his thoughtful kindness that, unable to endure her praises, he told her the true state of the case. Thereupon, as we could plainly see, conflicting emotions, in which pleasure at his truthfulness and generosity and dismay at the depths of his boyish depravity were strangely mingled, took possession of her mind.

Matters went on after this smoothly enough, and it was nearly two years later that the following event occurred.

Miss Gregg always kept her bedroom door locked while performing the mysteries of her toilet; but on one occasion she had forgotten to do so, and the housemaid entering the room beheld her seated before the dressing-table, assiduously combing out plaits of false hair.

This interesting piece of information having been imparted to us, we composed a doggerel poem on the subject, and set it to a popular air. We were carolling this one morning when she unexpectedly entered the room and naturally inquired what we were singing.

My brother hesitated a moment, then drew from his pocket the paper on which he had scribbled the following lines, and handed it to her.

Miss Gregg wears false hair ;
Oh ! isn't it funny,
She hadn't enough
So she bought more with money.
Thus it doesn't all grow
Upon her fair head,
So that some is alive,
And some is quite dead.

Miss Gregg's face flushed and her eyes sparkled dangerously as she read these scandalous verses ; but, merely laying it down beside her, she went on with school as usual. When lessons were finished she took up the obnoxious paper, and bidding us accompany her, led the way gravely to grandmother's sitting-room. In a still more solemn manner she placed the paper before her, and requested her to read it.

Grandmother's comment was brief but severe. 'The children certainly deserve punishment for this impertinent nonsense.'

'That, madam, I leave to your discretion,' responded Miss Gregg stiffly, 'but I beg to state it is no longer consonant with my personal dignity to hold the post of their instructress.'

'Miss Gregg, the children have been very rude and naughty, but I scarcely think their offence deserves the importance you attach to it.'

‘Had it occurred, madam, at an earlier stage of our acquaintance, I might possibly have agreed with you, and I might have been induced to treat it as a matter of little importance, but as it is——’

Here I broke in, astonished, ‘Oh, Miss Gregg, how could it have occurred earlier? Why, we only found out the other day about your—your hair.’

Miss Gregg shuddered visibly, but deigned to take no further notice of the interruption than to expand her statement. ‘Had it occurred at an earlier stage of our acquaintance, I might have been tempted to hope that I could possibly instil delicacy and refinement into minds in which such qualities were so deplorably lacking; but after two years’ labour I relinquish the Sisyphean task in despair.’

‘It must be as you please,’ replied grandmother, rather coldly, for I do not think she altogether appreciated being told that we were utterly destitute of refinement and delicacy; ‘and as you take such a view of the children’s character, it is useless, I suppose, to urge you to remain.’

‘I agree with you, madam; there is an absolute uncongeniality of soul between them and myself, which I confess I despair of ever rectifying.’

Grandmother turned to us. ‘Now apologize at once to Miss Gregg for the impertinence you have written.’

We did so with a good grace, for we were delighted to hear she intended leaving. As for the opinion she had formed of our characters, that was a matter of indifference to us.

She accepted our apology, unbent sufficiently to ask as a personal favour that we might not be punished, and added that she would like to leave as soon as it was convenient to Mrs. Leigh. Grandmother placed no

obstacle in the way of her departure, and she left Charnham, false plaits and all, in less than a week.

Had I foreseen what would have been the result of making verses on Miss Gregg's back hair, I would sooner have put my hand in the fire than have shared in the undertaking; for, alas! it was arranged that Charlie should go to a boarding-school near London kept by a Mr. Edmondson, the brother of our pastor, and well known to our grandparents.

For the last half-year there had been at this school a lad called George Munro, the son of a farmer respected for his industry and integrity. Mr. Munro was one of our deacons, and the acknowledged leader of the strictest coterie of the members of the church. Mr. Munro viewed all 'carnal learning,' as he phrased it, with great indifference, and it was merely in deference to the wishes of a rich bachelor brother, who had charged himself with George's future, that he half unwillingly allowed him to receive so good an education.

As he and Charlie were soon to become schoolmates, grandfather invited him to spend a few days at his house, that they might become better acquainted before they met at school.

This arrangement at first did not prove a success—George was a shy, clumsy lad, brought up roughly on a farm; he poured his tea into his saucer, and put his knife into his mouth.

It was no wonder that we, who had been trained to consider such habits disagreeable and vulgar, should think disparagingly of such habits; and he soon discovered our thinly disguised opinion. Being quick and sensitive, he resented it bitterly.

On the second day matters reached a climax. Charlie possessed a set of tools, which he had been taught how

to use by a carpenter. George's attempts at handling these tools set us both laughing, whereat his pent-up anger bursting forth, he turned on my brother and said: 'I may not be a gentleman—though I can't say you behave like one—and I may not be able to do all that you can do with those white hands of yours, but I'll tell you what I can do; I can give you a hiding, and I'll do it too, if I have any more of your cheek.'

'Try, then,' Charlie retorted, and began pulling off his coat, for somehow he had heard that this was the correct thing to do.

Whether it suddenly struck George that it would displease his parents to hear he had been fighting, or whether his anger had by this time subsided, I cannot say; but he drew back from the contest, saying contemptuously, 'I never fight with girls, and I shouldn't like to spoil that pretty face of yours!' Having discharged this parting shot he walked off indignantly, only turning a moment to call out: 'I'm going home; you can tell the doctor what you choose.'

We looked at each other in dismay, our consciences smiting us for the rude way in which we had treated our guest, and I said impetuously, 'Do go and fetch him back.'

Charlie ran after the aggrieved youth, reaching him just at the gate, and said entreatingly, 'Don't go away, Munro, you'll get us into no end of a row if you do; we've behaved horribly, and that's a fact.'

When George heard this apology, his lowering countenance slowly cleared, while he answered rather sulkily, 'Yes, I'll come back; we've been a couple of fools, there's nothing to choose between us.'

After this explosion and mutual apology we certainly did get on better, but no one was sorry when the

visit came to an end. However, when the two boys were thrown together constantly at school, matters improved, as the following extract from one of Charlie's letters to me will show.

‘I must tell you, Munro has not turned out half such a bad fellow after all. The boys in my class made great fun of my white face and hands, and some had the cheek to call me “Pretty Miss Mollie.” Munro can use his fists pretty well, for he’s awfully strong. He stood up for me and gave them a good licking for their impudence, and he’s teaching me to do the same. You know how my hair curls, bother it! It was a little longer than theirs, so they gave me another nickname: “The Fair One with the Golden Locks.” I was downright angry and was going to fight, but Munro said, “It’s the truth, and you may just as well be good-tempered over it.”

‘I went right upstairs to my room, having borrowed a pair of scissors from the housemaid, cut off all my curls in front, and was working round to the back—which was precious hard work, I can tell you—when in walked Munro. He roared with laughing when he saw me, and said, “Hullo! that’s your little game, is it? You have made a guy of yourself and no mistake! I’d better trim you up a little,” and he set to work and cropped me close all round. My hair looked all jaggy when I joined the class, in spite of Munro’s clippings, and the master demanded, “Whatever made you turn barber, Leigh?” Before I could answer, a boy called out, “Please sir, he’s cut his hair off because we call him ‘The Fair One with the Golden Locks.’” The master laughed, and said, “Nature has been too kind to you, my boy; if you are no longer ‘The Fair One with,’

you are certainly 'The Fair One without.' " Wasn't it a beastly shame of him? The boys heard all he said, and, to add to it all, he told me to go to the hair-dresser's after school, and pay to have my hair cut decently.

'Munro went with me and paid the barber before I got the chance, and I could only make him take half, for he said he'd as much right to pay as I, as he'd assisted at the clipping.

'Now, good-bye, I've no more to say at present,

'Your affectionate brother,

'CHARLIE.

'P.S.—I suppose you are with that Christine, now I'm away, from morning to night; but mind, there's not a boy in the school I like, or ever shall like, half as well as you.'

'That Christine,' to whom Charlie alluded, was my bosom friend, a girl of my own age. Her parents had recently died, and she had been left to the guardianship of her uncle, Mr. Nicholson, who resided with his sister in Charnham. They were both members of our chapel. Mr. Nicholson was a man of literary tastes, and owned the chief bookseller's shop in the town, and his sister was more than usually accomplished.

When grandfather learned that Miss Nicholson intended educating her niece, he requested her to take me as a pupil too. To this she willingly assented, so in this way Christine and I became attached to one another. When the boys returned for the holidays, the four of us spent much of our time together; but as Charlie was jealous of my affection for my new friend, he and I generally paired off, leaving her to George's companionship.

George was only too pleased that it should be so, as from the first moment of their meeting he had been captivated by her winsome face and engaging manner ; but Christine confided to me that she admired and liked Charlie far the better of the two. Yet in spite of this and my brother's jealousy, we always managed to enjoy each other's society thoroughly during the holidays.

CHAPTER VI

A FATEFUL MEETING

ONE lovely morning in May, when I was about fifteen, grandfather invited me to drive with him to Ashton Priory, a place twenty miles from Charnham, as Sir Reginald Ashton, its proprietor, desired to have his opinion on the state of his wife's health.

I started in the highest spirits, and as we drove along the roads and lanes, pleasant sights and sounds greeted us everywhere. The trees looked fresh and beautiful in their new foliage, the hedges were covered with white hawthorn blossom, and the grassy meadows were full of frolicsome lambs and their steady-going mothers. So much did I enjoy the air and sunshine that I was quite sorry when the carriage turned sharply through the massive gates into a long avenue of beeches, and I saw the grey towers of Ashton Priory rising before me. It was a fine old mansion, and stood in grounds of considerable extent.

While grandfather was engaged in visiting his patient I amused myself by watching the graceful movements of the deer in the park below. Suddenly my attention was attracted by the appearance of a youth coming along the terrace, followed by a young fox-terrier, which was crouching and crawling with downcast head and dejected tail. I soon saw that the poor animal had good

cause for unhappiness, for its unfeeling owner suddenly turned and, swearing violently, struck it several hard blows with the heavy stick he carried.

Hardly conscious of what I was doing, I sprang from the carriage, rushed towards the young savage, and exclaimed, with heat, 'Please, do not beat your dog like that!'

The youth stared contemptuously at me and said, 'Pray, who are you? And what business is it of yours to interfere? However, I can tell you for your comfort that this is the last beating he will ever get, for I'm going to have the stupid little beast drowned.'

'Don't drown it,' I cried. 'Give it to me.'

'Well, I must say, young lady, you don't want for cheek! I can tell you, it's not my habit to bestow gifts on impertinent strangers, but you can have him for ten bob.'

I instantly accepted the offer, but looking into my purse I discovered that I had only seven shillings, and when I appealed to the groom Robert, I found that he had none to lend me.

It was not necessary to explain the situation. 'You want the dog very particularly, don't you?' said the owner, with a bold look. 'Well, I'll take the seven shillings, and you can throw a kiss or two in to complete the bargain, as you are a passable maid.'

As I placed the money in his outstretched hand, he stooped towards me and brought his odious face so close to mine that I shuddered and drew back. Seeing my start of disgust, he said impudently, 'Come, a bargain's a bargain; if you cry off and don't give me those kisses, you keep your money and I drown the dog.'

What I should have done I really cannot say—my heart bled for the poor, trembling little creature, whose

fate seemed to depend on me ; but in the very nick of time a gentleman stepped from a French window that opened on the terrace close to where we were standing.

‘ Henry,’ he said sternly, ‘ can it be possible that I saw you taking money from this young lady ? ’

‘ Yes,’ he answered sullenly ; ‘ I’ve been selling her my dog.’

‘ Indeed ! ’ replied the gentleman scornfully. ‘ It is a new thing for an Ashton to take up dog-dealing. Return her the money at once.’

‘ I don’t want the money, and I do want the dog, for he’s going to drown the poor creature,’ I protested.

‘ Certainly, child, you shall have the dog ; I give him to you with pleasure. I have yet to learn that my son, or any other person, has a right to dispose of my property without my consent.’

From this speech I gathered that it was Sir Reginald Ashton who was speaking to me. The youth at once handed me back my money, and at his father’s further command seized the dog roughly and placed it in the back of the carriage. He then walked away, to my intense relief.

Sir Reginald now turned to me and said courteously, ‘ I must apologize to you, my dear young lady, for the extraordinary conduct of my son ; but at school he became mixed up with a set who are always buying and selling, and, notwithstanding the fact that you belong to the fair sex, he has doubtless been treating you as one of his schoolfellows.’

These remarks of the father certainly seemed to place the son’s behaviour in a better light ; but I could not forget the further toll demanded, and held to my former opinion of his insolence and cruelty.

Sir Reginald, evidently anxious to atone for his son’s

incivility, asked me to come into the house to partake of some refreshment. Fearful of being encountered by the terrible boy again, I accepted his invitation, though I knew it was disobeying grandfather's express command ; for he had told me never to enter the houses of his patients without his permission. However, I risked his displeasure as the lesser evil.

My host brought me into the room he had just quitted, where I found the table covered with different sorts of cake, fruit, and wine. I chose some grapes, and as I ate them Sir Reginald talked most kindly to me and paid me every attention. In a short time grandfather made his appearance, and looked surprised when he saw me. I gathered from his manner, though he made no comment, that he was far from pleased with my conduct. The two gentlemen talked some time together, while I sat enjoying the lovely prospect from the window.

'Now, Katherine, I am ready,' grandfather said at length ; and I knew from his giving me my formal name that I was in for a good scolding when we were alone.

Sir Reginald, instead of summoning a servant, himself led the way through an immense hall, lighted by stained-glass windows, and filled with mediaeval suits of armour, oak cabinets, and straight-backed chairs ; the walls, too, were decorated with hunting-horns, bows and arrows, antlers, and all manner of curious things.

We had just reached the vestibule when a carriage drove up ; the door was thrown open by a footman in laced livery, and a stately old lady descended from it.

Sir Reginald went forward to receive her, and I heard him say, in cordial tones : 'This is an unexpected pleasure, Mrs. Westbrook ! It is indeed kind of you to drive so far to visit us.'

By this time the old lady addressed as Mrs. Westbrook had entered the house, and I saw that she had well-cut features, piercing black eyes, and silvery hair. She held herself erect, and most people would doubtless have thought her exceedingly handsome ; but her good looks gave me no pleasure : I was repelled by her haughty and even hard expression.

She was in the midst of polite inquiries after the health of Lady Ashton when, entering the vestibule, she came face to face with grandfather. For a moment she seemed taken aback ; then her face became livid, and her dark eyes literally flashed forth fire.

For what seemed an age to the bystanders, though it was scarcely thirty seconds, she remained rooted to the spot : then, in a hoarse voice, she attempted to address him, but I could not catch the sense of the words she used. Suddenly recollecting where she was, with a disdainful gesture she drew her skirts slightly around her, as if to avoid some dire pollution ; and, with a parting look of concentrated malice, she swept past us into the hall.

While this mysterious scene was in progress, I looked first at Mrs. Westbrook and then at grandfather ; but nothing in his face or his attitude answered to the extraordinary feeling of hate exhibited by her. He turned slightly pale, but remained silent, and I heard him draw a long, deep breath of relief when she had passed.

He advanced at once to the front door, beckoned to our groom, and, when the carriage drew up, he handed me into it and sprang in himself. We were just about to start when Sir Reginald came hurriedly out of the house. 'This has been an unfortunate *contretemps*, doctor,' he said kindly ; 'and I need hardly tell you

how sorry I am it should have occurred under my roof.' Then he looked at me curiously and asked, 'By the by, is this young lady any—eh—you know what I mean?'

My grandfather bowed assent to whatever he meant, took a courteous farewell of him, and drove off. I was truly thankful to leave a place where two such disagreeable events had occurred.

When we had gone a little way, I noticed grandfather was holding the reins mechanically, his thoughts evidently far away from the horses. His face had a set, rigid look; his eyes were gazing steadfastly into space. I heard him mutter something, but he was not speaking to me.

When we quitted the grounds of Ashton Priory, instead of taking the road to the village, he let the horses go in the direction of home. He started like one roused from heavy sleep when Robert called out, with the freedom of an old privileged servant, 'Master, where be you a-driving to? Bain't you going to put them 'osses up and give them a feed and rest?'

Grandfather at once turned their heads in the opposite direction, to their great annoyance, the poor short-sighted creatures not knowing what good cheer immediately awaited them.

When we reached the cosy little inn he ordered dinner, and while it was being prepared he sat moody and silent. After a time he rose from his chair and took to pacing up and down the room. Presently his glance fell upon the terrier which I had brought with me and was now engaged in petting.

'Where did that dog come from?' he inquired.

I was delighted to have the opportunity of telling him all that had happened; and when he had heard the story he did not blame me for breaking his rules.

He scarcely ate anything at dinner, but when we had finished and were rambling over the garden and neighbouring fields, followed everywhere by my new acquisition, grandfather seemed to recover his spirits, and became so much like his ordinary self that I felt emboldened to ask a question about Sir Reginald's strange visitor.

'Grandfather,' I asked, 'why did that horrid old woman look and speak to you in that manner? I hate her!'

'Stop, child,' he cried hastily and with strong emotion; 'I cannot allow you to speak of that lady in such a way.'

'I only know I dislike her!' I answered.

He laid one hand on my mouth, and with the other drew me to him, looking full into my face.

'Kate,' he said, very slowly and with evident effort, 'you are nearly fifteen, and no longer a child; the time has come when you must listen to a sad tale. Never again must you speak of Mrs. Westbrook as you have just done. Learn at once that this lady stands in as close a relationship to you as I do: she is the mother of your dead father, and consequently your grandmother and Charlie's.'

CHAPTER VII

THE PAST AND ITS LEGACIES

DURING our drive home nothing more could be said about Mrs. Westbrook, with Robert sitting behind. When we reached home, there were several cases awaiting the doctor's attention, so I went straight to grannie and told her all about our meeting with my other strange grandmother at Sir Reginald Ashton's. I finished by asking, 'Why does she dislike grandfather so much?'

Grannie made no reply for several moments; and as I looked into her sweet face, lovely in spite of age, I saw tears well up in her eyes. She was strangely disturbed, and with manifest effort she said, 'My darling, I cannot bear the idea of prejudicing you against Mrs. Westbrook in speaking of the past, nor can I allow you to think your grandfather was to blame in any respect. The fact is, your grandmother, as a girl, was a great beauty and an heiress, being an only child. She had been dreadfully spoilt by her father, Mr. Langton, a wealthy banker. Your grandfather happened to render him an important service, in return for which the old man took a great fancy to him, and asked him constantly to his house.

'Perhaps I ought not to feel surprised that Miss Langton fell desperately in love with him, for in my

eyes he was always the most charming of men, and there were others who considered him both handsome and attractive. Then Mr. Langton died. A few weeks after this sad event Miss Langton sent for him, and asked him to marry her, for she never imagined it possible that he could be indifferent to her charms. She had received many offers of marriage, and she feared that her immense fortune would prevent his seeking her hand. It was a sad business altogether. At that very time he was engaged to me, and of course he told her so. She was deeply mortified, and declared angrily that he had encouraged her to make the overture, though there was not a word of truth in this accusation. Shortly afterwards she married the Hon. Cecil Westbrook, third son of the Earl of Wallington.

‘A few months before his death her father had bought a large estate about nine miles from here, including an old manor house which the Westbrooks pulled down. In its place a palatial residence had been built, which they named Westbrook Hall. Two children were born to them there; the elder, Augustus, was spoiled by the mother, whilst the younger boy, Lionel, was the father’s favourite. The marriage proved an unhappy one, and after some years the ill-assorted pair mutually agreed to separate. Augustus remained with his mother, while Lionel clung to his father in spite of his mother’s anger at such a course of action.

‘Mr. Westbrook took up his residence near Charnham, and as he was a great invalid he chose your grandfather as his medical adviser. This gave the doctor an opportunity of becoming acquainted with Lionel, and the more he saw of him the more he liked the youth. The attachment was mutual—so much so

that, when Mr. Westbrook died, leaving his son penniless, and his mother offering him no assistance, he gratefully accepted your grandfather's help. Lionel's ambition being to qualify as a doctor, your grandfather paid for his training, and finally took him into partnership.

'I cannot tell you how much we loved him—he seemed like our son. And when he fell in love with your mother, and she returned his love, it afforded us the utmost happiness. They lived here after they married, assuming the name of Leigh. Those were happy years to me.

'Sad to relate, when Charlie was barely three, your dear father caught a malignant fever from a patient of his, and died. Your poor mother, who insisted on nursing him, succumbed to the same malady, leaving you two little orphans to our care.

'Your Grandmother Westbrook at once demanded that you should be given into her keeping, promising, in that case, to leave you half her fortune. But this was out of our power, for your father, in his will, had left you to our guardianship. Moreover, he had exacted a solemn promise from us that you should be kept in ignorance as long as possible of his real name, and that you should be brought up as Nonconformists. Therefore we were obliged to refuse Mrs. Westbrook's request.

'She was extremely angry at this, and wrote accusing your grandfather of blighting her girlhood, of stealing her son's affections, and now of wickedly preventing her from obtaining possession of his children.

'I am glad, my darling, that my sad story is nearly ended; but I must tell you that three years ago your Uncle Augustus died, and again Mrs. Westbrook wrote to ask that Charlie might be given up to her. Your

grandfather had again to refuse, painful though it was to him.

'Charlie will now have to be made acquainted with these facts, and I beg of you not to prejudice his mind against Mrs. Westbrook as a result of to-day's experience. Darling, say as little as possible about your meeting with her at Sir Reginald Ashton's.'

This I promised to do, for the story had strangely sobered me.

Of course Charlie was surprised, just as I had been, to learn that he had another grandmother living, and many were the conversations we had on the subject. Nor could we help but think of our parents, of whom we had no recollection. However, our thoughts were diverted into another channel, for grandfather decided that we should be sent at once to L——, in Germany, where my brother could attend lectures for the next three years at the University, while I should become a student of music at the famous Conservatoire of that city. Grandfather made arrangements for us to be received as boarders by Herr Steibelhut, the worthy pastor of a small church in L——.

We left our relatives in England with aching hearts, and were not a little homesick when we reached our destination. The pastor and his wife we found to be genuine, warm-hearted people, who showed us every possible kindness, and made us as comfortable as their frugal style of living permitted. There is no need for me to dwell on this portion of our lives; we formed no intimate friendships, mainly because the religious opinions of Herr Steibelhut prevented him from associating with people of his own rank. As for the members of his church, they were drawn from persons in a humble walk of life. However, under the influence

of their consistent lives my floating religious ideas became fixed and definite, and Charlie, too, seemed favourably impressed by their piety.

I think we must have worked well at our studies, for the professors with whom we had to do seemed pleased with the progress we made; and I look back to this time as the most peaceful, if not the happiest, part of my life.

It was when we were home for vacation at the end of our second year at L—— that grandfather said to us abruptly, and with evident effort, 'Children, I promised you three years in L——. Shall you be dreadfully disappointed if I ask you to give up your last year? I find that old age is creeping upon me, and I am anxious to have you nearer to me. If Charlie desires to follow in the footsteps of his father and grandfather, he can pursue his medical studies in London, where he will not be so far from us. However, it is a mere whim on my part, and if you greatly wish it, you shall go back to Germany.'

Needless to say, we readily acquiesced in our dear old guardian's wish—the more readily because we had both noticed an indefinable change in him. He appeared languid, and unnaturally gentle for one who loved a good argument; and lately it had proved well-nigh impossible to draw him into one of those duels of words to which we were very partial. But as soon as we had declared our intention he seemed to regain a measure of his wonted vivacity of spirits.

One memorable afternoon in June I was sitting with him in the garden under the pleasant shade of a large walnut-tree. The day was sultry, with scarcely the suspicion of a breeze, and the branches over our heads remained almost motionless. Suddenly we heard the

garden gate shut with a bang, and a moment later we saw Dr. Brown coming towards us, looking irritated and excited.

'Well, Leigh!' he called out, as we advanced to meet him, 'have you heard the news? Mrs. Westbrook is very ill, and not expected to recover!'

'No, I had not heard,' said grandfather.

'You know,' burst out Dr. Brown impetuously, his natural irritability doubtless aggravated by the extreme warmth of the day, 'I never approved of the line of conduct you have adopted. Let me tell you plainly I think it neither wise nor Christian-like. You have often talked to me of the duty of forgiveness: why don't you practise what you preach, and not separate these children from their own flesh and blood?'

His friend smiled as he answered, 'Come, Brown! this is not like your usual self; be candid, and confess that, had Mrs. Westbrook been a poor woman, you would not have started on this tirade. You know that I forgave her long ago, and it is no ill feeling that prevents my cultivating her friendship.'

'I don't know that at all,' the vicar retorted; 'and, if you will have the truth, let me tell you I can't imagine how you can justify it to your conscience, keeping that fine lad of yours out of his lawful rights—to say nothing of Miss Katie here! All the world knows you are a queer fellow, Leigh; but you have no right to allow your whims to prejudice these children's welfare.'

Grandfather winced visibly at this speech, and replied, with earnestness, 'God knows my one desire has been to do the right; and I have made it my duty to carry out faithfully my son-in-law's instructions.'

Dr. Brown, moved by this reply, adopted a milder

tone. 'I should have thought it a dutiful thing for grandchildren to be on friendly terms with their grandmother. Personally I should not like to usurp the place of Providence, and prevent Charlie inheriting a large estate. Think of the power of doing untold good that it would put into his hands.'

'Yes, and possibly of doing untold harm too—harm to himself as well as to others,' retorted my guardian, roused at last to combat by the persistence of his antagonist. 'I have watched my grandson closely, and if the view I take of his character is correct, I apprehend but little blessing to him from the wealth and the position you speak of. It is called a sad dispensation of Providence when a man breaks his leg or loses his money. I should call it a sadder one if my dear boy, with his unformed character, were placed where you desire him, with a crowd of flatterers at his heels. He is now intent on entering an honourable profession, but the temptation to become an idler would probably be too strong for him. No; I would rather the lad were tried with sickness, care, or poverty than with an undue prosperity which might turn him into a useless coxcomb.'

'I congratulate you,' returned Dr. Brown sarcastically, 'on the expectations you have as a result of your training. With such an estimate of the youth's character, no wonder you desire that no responsibility should be thrust upon him. But let me say, most emphatically, I take a more hopeful view.'

During this conversation grandfather's face had flushed deeper and deeper, till by this time it had become crimson. Pressing his hand to his side, he said, 'I am only a poor, short-sighted mortal. God grant I may be mistaken in my judgement of the dear boy! I have done my best to carry out his father's wishes. When I

am dead I fetter no one ; and remember,' he said, taking the vicar's hand, 'I impose no restrictions. Let his friends do their best for him.'

Nothing more was said on this subject ; the conversation flowed in happier channels ; but I noticed that grandfather still retained the same flushed look.

In the evening he went as usual to have a quiet hour in the library ; but when the servants had assembled for prayers and he did not come in to take his accustomed seat, I went to fetch him. I knocked, but there was no answer. Thinking that he must be dozing, I opened the door gently and went in.

He sat in his arm-chair with a book open by his side, but he was not reading, and his head lay buried in his hands as he leant heavily forward on the table. Even this did not alarm me ; I still supposed him to be asleep. Alas ! he was sleeping, but in a sense I little suspected. When I touched his hand to arouse him it was lifeless. In an agony of fear I gazed into his face and a chill wave seemed to sweep over me. Grandfather was dead !

All that passed after this seemed like a hideous dream. Doctors came and did what they could to restore animation, but it was in vain. The unanimous verdict was that he had died of heart disease. One of them told us that, two months before, the deceased had been to him for examination, suspecting something to be wrong, but nothing definite had been discovered.

As soon as his death became known, the town, as well as the country round, woke to a sense of his merits and of the loss they had sustained. Churchmen, led by the vicar, vied with Dissenters in paying him their tribute of respect ; and with one accord acknowledged the purity and nobility of the life that had been lived among them.

Dr. Brown wept like a child over the loss of his dear friend, but grandmother shed never a tear, and insisted on reserving to herself all responsibilities connected with the funeral. The doctors plainly told us that this unnatural calm made them apprehensive on her behalf, and events soon proved that their fears were well founded, for in a few days she was seized with paralysis, and both body and mind became seriously affected. Only those who have passed through the ordeal of such a bereavement can enter into our feelings under this terrible double blow.

However, we were not left in loneliness. Christine Nicholson, my fellow pupil up to the time of my going to Germany, had remained my fast friend ; the more so as she had loved my grandfather passionately. Throughout the two years of my absence she had corresponded with me regularly, seldom failing to insert some interesting item of news pertaining to the doctor ; hence she proved an unfailing source of comfort to me. Moreover, Miss Gregg reappeared, amiable and eager to help me in nursing my grandmother. Some months before, having discovered that she was in straitened circumstances, my grandparents had visited and helped her ; hence the total change in her. Sufficient to say, the past was never alluded to, and things moved so smoothly that she became quite a fixture in the home.

Dr. Brown visited us constantly, and for a time he seemed greatly depressed. One day, however, he appeared in better spirits. Drawing me aside he said, 'Katie, you remember the conversation I had with my dear friend at our last meeting ?'

I made no reply ; could I ever forget any incident of that dreadful day !

'I have often thought about it, and I consider it pro-

vidential that he should have formally entrusted Charlie's future to me. Your grandmother, Mrs. Westbrook, has recovered from her alarming illness, and has promised to see me. You may be sure I shall leave no stone unturned to bring about a reconciliation.'

I was greatly amazed to learn this was the view he took of grandfather's wishes, and I tried to enlighten him as to what I considered the true meaning of the conversation.

He immediately cut me short. 'My dear child,' he said, 'I heard every word my old friend uttered. You are but young; surely I am the more competent to form a correct opinion of your grandfather's real ideas on the subject! I feel it a sacred trust bequeathed to me to bring about this reconciliation. Say nothing to Charlie, for fear my efforts should prove unavailing.'

I listened in astonishment, but I clearly saw that nothing I could urge would turn him from his purpose.

A day or two after this conversation, Charlie and I received an invitation to dine at the vicarage, and I was not surprised on entering the drawing-room to find our host talking to a stately dame, whom I at once recognized as Mrs. Westbrook. She looked carelessly at me as I advanced towards her, but when her glance fell on Charlie, a gleam of recognition instantly flashed in her dark eyes, and with a sharp cry of 'My boy! My boy!' she sprang forward and threw her arms round his neck. Overcome by the excitement, she half swooned, and would have fallen had not Charlie assisted her to a chair.

I learned afterwards that my brother was the image of his Uncle Augustus, and for the moment the poor mother had imagined she saw her dead son restored to life again. In a short time she recovered from the

shock, but during the whole of the evening her eyes dwelt constantly on his face, and she talked to him incessantly, apparently unconscious that there was any one else in the room.

Dr. Brown was delighted at the evident success of his efforts as far as Charlie was concerned, but he was much annoyed at the marked indifference with which she treated me. After a time he could repress his indignation no longer, and, to my disgust, he led me towards her saying, 'Come, come, dear lady, it is not fair that your grandson should occupy all your attention; you have a granddaughter who has equal claim to your regard.'

In answer to this appeal Mrs. Westbrook calmly put up her eyeglass, looked coldly at me, and said, 'It is difficult to realize that this is my granddaughter; she resembles neither the Langtons nor the Westbrooks.' Then, turning away, she continued her conversation with Charlie.

'Never mind, Katie,' whispered the doctor to me, 'you are a Leigh, every inch of you; and that's as good any day as being a wild Westbrook or a purse-proud Langton.'

Possibly because of my resemblance to the Leighs she never cared much about me, but this must have been due merely to indifference, not to dislike, for she called soon after to invite me as well as Charlie to make my home at Westbrook Hall. She was highly indignant with my perverseness, as she termed it, when I refused on the ground that I could not possibly leave my invalid grandmother.

Charlie was not at home when Mrs. Westbrook came, but he was so much annoyed at her unreasonable anger towards me that, the next time he met Dr. Brown,

he declared hotly : ' I am not going—not I ! Why should I submit myself to the caprices of an ill-natured old woman who does not know how to behave decently to my sister ? For all I care, she is welcome to leave her money to whom she pleases. I have enough, thank Heaven, and there is no need for me to turn fortune-hunter.'

The vicar, who seemed to see his well-laid plans in danger of coming to naught, had great difficulty in keeping his temper ; but, as he was bent on effecting a reconciliation between grandson and grandmother, he managed to control himself, and by dint of much persuasion extracted a promise from Charlie that he would pay a visit to his lonely relative. He was shrewd enough to know that, directly he touched Charlie on his sympathetic side, he might do what he liked with him.

Charlie had another reason—an unuttered one—which added greatly to the reluctance he felt in leaving Charnham. At this time he fancied himself deeply in love with Christine, having made up his mind that she was very beautiful ; and the evident admiration she had for him, though unconsciously shown, added fuel to the flame. He was always by her side in our walks and drives ; and when George Munro, who had gone to reside permanently with his uncle at Corrington, came over for a few weeks to Charnham and joined our trio, he had no choice left but to become my cavalier. And a very sulky and disagreeable one I found him.

It may seem ridiculous that lads still in their teens should think so seriously of love and marriage ; but, if it were folly, I must take my share of the blame, for I encouraged Charlie's growing attachment to Christine by every means in my power. It was my dearest wish

that Christine should become my sister. I did not trouble myself much about George's feelings, as I considered that even if my brother were out of the question, George had not the slightest chance of winning her affections.

Charlie, however, was eventually persuaded by Dr. Brown to go to Westbrook Hall, and he returned delighted with his visit. He talked a good deal of the aristocratic set he had met there, and I found that its mistress had spared no pains to make him feel that a very happy life lay before him if he would but decide to make her house his home. She was desirous that his name should be entered at once at Trinity College, on whose books the name of Westbrook had figured for several generations; and this wish of hers so fully coincided with Charlie's own inclinations that ere long he found himself among the freshmen at Trinity.

In his early letters to me he sent long messages to Christine, but as the weeks passed these became gradually fewer and shorter, then ceased altogether. In a letter I received towards the end of the term, speaking of his return to Westbrook Hall—his home henceforth—he said, 'You may be quite sure that the first thing I shall do will be to run over to Charnham to see you; but don't ask any one to meet me, I want to have you all to myself.' I felt sure that this hint had reference to Christine; but, to make doubly sure, I said to him on his arrival, 'You told me to invite no one to meet you, Charlie; did that include Christine?'

He turned very red, looked ashamed of himself, and stammered out, 'The fact is, sis, I was an awful goose philandering after her as I did. Do you know, this last

month I have almost forgotten her existence, and there is nothing very desirable after all in the connexion.'

'Oh, Charlie!' I cried, in the bitterness of my disappointment, 'she likes you still; why did you pay her so much attention?'

'I was a precious fool to show her any, but I haven't a doubt that she has dropped me as completely as I have her. Don't grow sentimental, Katie, and remember'—this was said emphatically—'I mean to keep out of her way, so it is no use your trying to throw us together.'

I said no more. If he had forgotten her already his love had not been worthy of hers, and it was certainly better to leave him alone. From this time they rarely met, for Christine, perceiving how matters stood, avoided his society, being far too proud to show the slightest interest in a youth who had ceased to wish either for her love or her friendship.

I never ventured to speak to her on the subject, and if she suffered she did so in silence.

CHAPTER VIII

CARE AND COMEDY

IT was not only the change in my brother's feelings towards Christine that grieved me; but I saw that he was altering in other respects—not for the better.

In his letters he had frequently referred to a new friend, Ashton of Trinity Hall. Why he did so was scarcely apparent, for it was mere trifles that he related; but I instinctively conceived a strong aversion for this man. My dismay may be imagined when I discovered that he was the very individual who had behaved so insolently to me at Ashton Priory.

I remonstrated with Charlie for his choosing such a friend, but he only laughed and said, 'My dear, proper little sister, there is not the slightest doubt that Ashton is not one of your sort, and I must confess I don't care overmuch for some of his ways; but I am under great obligations to him, seeing that he has taken me up and introduced me to his set. Besides, he is a great pet of grandmother's, and she is always having him at Westbrook Hall.'

This information only confirmed my fears. At the words 'his set' a hideous vision rose before me of Ashtons indefinitely multiplied; and I could not bear to think of my brother as having any dealings with such persons. No wonder that there was less of that

frankness in his expression, which had always given a certain charm to his face.

My life had changed indeed since grandfather's death! Before, I had been a light-hearted girl who scarcely knew what sorrow meant; now, not only had I experienced the sadness of bereavement, but I had become the prey of a more cruel sorrow—an aching anxiety, which grew more acute as the deterioration in Charlie appeared more manifest. I was helpless; I could not check him in his downward career. He only scoffed at my 'sermons,' as he styled my remonstrances; and when he told me at the beginning of the long vacation that he and Ashton, with some mutual friends, were forming a reading-party for Switzerland, I felt so utterly miserable that after they had started I fretted myself into a low fever.

Miss Gregg nursed me tenderly through the illness; and when I recovered, the doctor having recommended a change of air, I went to stay with my dear Phoebe, who lived at Silcote in Somerset. She had lost her husband two years before, and had never been able to afford the time to pay us a visit since she became a widow.

Our meeting proved a doleful one. We both wept over the recital of our respective losses, till Phoebe, recollecting herself, said half angrily, 'Whatever am I thinking of, Miss Katie, to let my tongue run on in this fashion, and you with that poor white bit of a face? You'll be as bad as ever again!'

From that moment she was her old brisk, unselfish self.

She lived in a charming old house, covered with creeper, which had originally been the residence of a gentleman farmer, but was now rented by her, with a

large grazing farm, on moderate terms. The rooms were spacious and well lighted, and though furnished in a somewhat primitive fashion, were thoroughly comfortable. The one I liked least was the 'best parlour,' given over to my sole use. It had the usual complement of plain furniture, covered with gaudy chintz, and a chimney-piece adorned with brilliantly painted and gilded china. Not a chair had escaped without a coloured antimacassar, which cannot be described as a thing of beauty.

One proof of her thoughtful kindness touched me greatly : she had hired the best piano she could obtain from the nearest town, knowing, as she told me, that I could not live without my music.

The baby whom she had brought on one occasion to see us at Charnham was now a big active boy, and there was also a second child, a bonny little girl of four years, who speedily became a great pet with me. I did not see much of Mrs. David Smith, as she was very busy with her large dairy, and it was the season for cheese-making.

The doctor's advice was that I should be out of doors as much as possible, and as walking tired me I adopted the plan of hiring a donkey, on whose back I took frequent excursions, attended by the lad who owned the animal. In this manner I became familiar with all the lanes and roads about Silcote. The scenery was a constant delight to me, for most of my life had been passed in a flat country where rising ground was a rare sight, an old Roman embankment being the only apology for a hill. Silcote, on the contrary, possessed little conical grass-grown hillocks scattered here and there, as well as a background of wooded hills ; and beyond these I could see range after range of higher

ones, purple in the distance, and stretching away as far as the eye could reach. It was the height of summer, and all nature seemed to be bright and glorious. The wild flowers, the song of birds, the changing sky, the murmuring streams, had each glad stories to tell me, and under their gentle influence health returned and my heart revived.

Would that I could say something in praise of the Sunday services I attended, but I cannot; they were uninteresting in the extreme. I went with nurse, morning and evening, to a little mission-room, whose pulpit—if I may apply so fine a name to it—was occupied by various members of a chapel in the town, five miles away. The room was situated over the largest shop in the place; it had accommodation for about seventy people, and was furnished with uncomfortable benches. The congregation consisted principally of farm-labourers and their families, and Mrs. Smith was one of the chief supporters of the ‘cause.’

On my third Sunday evening a stranger entered some time after the service had commenced, evidently not knowing that at this ‘little Bethel’ it began at the primitive hour of six. He was tall, well made, distinguished looking, and both his dress and his bearing indicated the gentleman. Naturally I felt interested in the newcomer, for he was the first I had seen since my arrival who seemed to correspond with the world I had left. Something of this may have appeared in my manner; but it would have been wiser had I repressed my curiosity, for all at once he turned his head sharply in my direction. Our eyes met, and I felt decidedly ashamed to be caught staring at him. After this I looked persistently in another direction, but had the uncomfortable feeling that he was taking note of me.

When the service concluded I stayed with Mrs. Smith to Communion, and the stranger, after speaking a moment or two to the preacher, remained as well. On our way home Phoebe remarked, 'I wonder what brought a gentleman like that to our mission-room ; he looks much more like one of the Church folk. I suppose he has come down from London for a day or two in the country.' As neither of us had more than supposition to offer, the subject dropped.

Next morning, as usual, my donkey and boy made their appearance ; but I saw immediately that my attendant was not in his usual spirits. His face generally beamed with good humour, but on this occasion he looked decidedly glum.

'What is the matter ?' I inquired.

'Oh, nothing, miss.' I have noticed that other people besides my donkey-boy return this by no means truthful answer when something has gone amiss with them.

'But I'm sure there is something,' I declared ; and by dint of persistent questioning I discovered at length the cause of his low spirits.

A grand fête was being held that day in a neighbouring village. A large tent had been erected, a band was playing, games of all kinds were in the programme of the day's amusement, and all might be seen and heard for the small sum of sixpence. I say small sum, but Johnny's father viewed the amount in a different light ; and when the boy had asked leave to go to the fête his parent had replied, 'It is not worth while spending so much money, lad, when most of the day you'll have to be with the young lady ; you shall go next time.'

Next time ! It seemed like an eternity, I expect, to

the poor lad, and he could not hide his bitter disappointment. The Somerset dialect, which I cannot possibly render, made it very difficult for me to understand the full facts of the case, but at last I made out that his father did not object to his son's going to the fête, only to his squandering money.

Delighted at the chance of gratifying Johnny, I handed him a shilling, saying, 'Be off and enjoy yourself; come back in two hours for the donkey, after which you can be free for the rest of the day.'

The lad's face shone for a moment, then clouded again as he said hesitatingly, 'Maybe I'll be doin' wrong to leave you, miss; the donkey takes awk'ard fits sometimes; and what 'd you do if he had one whiles I'm away?'

'Do? Oh, I'll manage him all right, don't be afraid. Surely, if I can ride a horse, a donkey will not be too much for me!'

The boy gave way to this cogent reasoning, and ran off, while I rode away on my grey steed, in blind confidence believing that he and I were the best of friends.

We jogged along quietly for four or five miles, when some dog-roses growing on the top of a high-banked hedge attracted me irresistibly, and I determined to gather them. I had speedily dismounted and fastened the donkey's bridle to a tree, climbed the bank, and was just proceeding to pluck the roses, when I heard a sharp snap below. Looking down, I saw that my steed had broken the branch to which his bridle was fastened, and had settled down to grazing by the roadside. This did not trouble me. Johnny had spoken of 'awkward fits,' but I had never found the animal anything but tractable. His will had never clashed with mine; he had walked,

trotted, or galloped just as I pleased, and even now I apprehended no trouble with him.

But when I descended from the bank after gathering all the flowers within reach, and moved towards the donkey, I discovered that my trust had been misplaced. He was a deceitful and perfidious beast! He allowed me again and again to approach within a few feet of him, then, wickedly tossing his head as much as to say, 'Catch me if you can!' he would trot away for twenty or thirty yards and settle himself to graze once more.

In vain I smothered my vexation and called to him in coaxing tones; all my blandishments were thrown away, and for half an hour this little game went on, till I was tired out and in despair. It was a sultry day, and no doubt the donkey found it pleasanter to be without my weight upon his back.

What was to be done? I sat down to rest for a little time, and decided on a plan of action. Determined to meet guile with guile, I rose from the ground, moved as listlessly as my real anxiety would permit in the direction of my enemy—for so I had begun to consider him by now—until he allowed me to come close up to him: then I made a sudden rush forward, seized the bridle, and with a proud heart congratulated myself on the success of my plan.

Too soon I discovered that this apparent victory was after all but disastrous defeat. In spite of strenuous efforts, I found myself dragged rapidly along the road, the donkey running backwards in his desire to regain his freedom, while I held on with all my might. I sympathized as I had never done before with the unfortunate Mr. Winkle! My strength had nearly gone and my breath was coming in gasps, when I heard the clatter of a horse's hoofs behind me. It came nearer

and nearer, and my heart leaped for joy. Deliverance was at hand ! But the donkey heard the sound too ; and, divining his danger, pricked up his ears, whisked suddenly round, and threw up his heels in such a fashion that I dropped the bridle just as the horseman rode up. My hat had fallen off in the struggle, my dress was torn and dirty, my hair had become unfastened, and in this condition I raised my eyes and encountered the astonished glance of the stranger whom the night before I had seen in the mission-room. I gave no thought to my forlorn appearance, but gasped out, ' Oh, will you catch my donkey for me, please ? '

He bowed, and at once set off in pursuit of my steed, whose pace now was astounding for a donkey, and in a moment huntsman and quarry had disappeared round a sharp corner of the lane. It then occurred to me that I must present a most remarkable appearance. I hastened to remedy matters as best I could, and by the time I had finished my toilet I saw my deliverer returning, leading the subdued captive. There was a peculiarly grave look in his eyes, but as I remembered the ludicrous position in which he had found me I could not restrain myself, and burst into a peal of laughter. After a moment's polite hesitation he joined in the laughter, and soon every trace of stiffness disappeared as we discussed my mishap. I remounted my steed with his assistance, and, in spite of all my protestations, he compelled his horse to walk by my side, and would not leave me until I reached the farm, where we found Johnny awaiting my return with a curious expression on his chubby face.

Ere my new acquaintance departed he drew out his card, presented it to me, then raising his hat he gave his horse the rein and rode off. I gave a glance at the card to find that it bore the name Francis Leslie Arnold.

CHAPTER IX

ENCHANTED SILCOTE

His life was gentle, and the elements
So mixed in him that Nature might stand up
And say to all the world, 'This was a man.'

Julius Cæsar, Act v.

IT rained so heavily next morning that I was prevented from going for my usual ride, but during the afternoon the weather cleared, and in the evening it became so fine that I sallied forth to see a sick woman whom I had frequently visited since coming to Silcote.

The air was cool and refreshing after the rain, and having been shut up in the house all day, I thoroughly enjoyed the walk. I stayed with the invalid longer than I had intended, and was surprised to find it so late when I started to return. There was a short cut across some meadows to Phoebe's house, and though it was a lonely path I chose it, being intent on reaching home as soon as possible. I had accomplished half my journey when I saw a man resting on the top of a stile in front of me. I approached somewhat nervously, and to my dismay I discovered that he was in a state of intoxication. Now I had always heard that it was better to show no fear before people in this condition, so, though inwardly quaking, I asked him as firmly and politely as I could to allow me to pass.

He replied gruffly, 'Pass if you want to.'

This, however, was impossible under the circumstances, so I spoke again. 'I am sorry to trouble you, but I cannot get over the stile whilst you are sitting upon it.'

In a drunken, clumsy fashion he got down, but without any advantage to me, as he propped himself against the stile so as to bar my way completely. With drunken gravity he stared at me the while I stood waiting his pleasure, then he remarked, in a thick, husky voice, 'I don't know your face; it strikes me you are a stranger to these parts. What's your name, miss?'

'My name is Leigh,' I answered calmly, desiring to propitiate him. 'I am staying with Mrs. Smith,' and I pointed to the house, which I could see in the distance. How I longed to find myself safely under the shelter of its hospitable roof!

My reply seemed to annoy him, for his manner changed, and he replied angrily, 'Mrs. Smith ain't no friend of mine, and her friends ain't neither. She's behaved very bad to me: she won't take me for her sweetheart.'

I need hardly say how fully I agreed with Phoebe's decision, though on looking more closely at him I saw by his clothes and general appearance that he was no very poor man. I had barely time to come to this conclusion when he startled me by saying, 'Come now you're a likely looking lass yourself; what do you say to putting Mrs. Smith's nose out of joint, eh?' He made a lurch forward and tried to put his arm round my waist. I sprang aside and managed to elude his grasp; then ran from him as fast as I could, though it was in the opposite direction to my destination. He

started after me, bent on giving chase, and terrified me with the threats and curses which he yelled out as he called on me to stop. — Stop? I would run till I dropped! I rushed straight on till, turning a sharp bend in the footpath, I nearly ran into the arms of one who was hurrying towards me. Imagine my relief when I recognised Mr. Arnold.

There was no time for explanation—indeed it was unnecessary—the situation explained itself. The next moment my drunken persecutor appeared round the corner shouting and swearing. Mr. Arnold hastened forward to intercept my pursuer, at the same time ordering him to stop. The tipsy fellow ignored this command, and even tried to elude his opponent, but next moment he suffered a heavy fall as he received a blow straight from Arnold's shoulder.

Casting a disdainful look on the fellow, my protector remarked, 'A little cold water will do you good,' and forthwith he rolled him into a shallow ditch hard by the path. Then he waited till the culprit raised himself out of his slimy bed in a bewildered fashion, whereupon Mr. Arnold came forward to me and said, 'Let us go, Miss Leigh; the scamp is little the worse for his ducking'; and he hurried me away and over the stile.

Once on the other side I felt secure, and sat down to recover breath, while my rescuer stood looking anxiously at me. 'I cannot understand how it is you are allowed to go wandering about by yourself in such lonely places,' he observed. 'I may not always have the good fortune to save you from unpleasant consequences.'

'I am sorry to give you so much trouble,' I said, 'and I do not wonder at your being annoyed with me.'

‘Annoyed with you!’ he exclaimed, sitting down beside me with an instant change of manner, and speaking gently. ‘What an idea! I am only grieved that there is no one to take care of you and prevent your being frightened to death.’

‘I am glad that you are not vexed at this episode; there is no one else to blame, for I am my own mistress and always do what I choose.’

‘Well,’ he replied, smiling, ‘I would do my best to put a stop to such a state of affairs if I had the power.’ Then laughingly he added, ‘Who would have imagined the extraordinary feats of valour I was destined to perform in this peaceful village! First I meet you, a maiden all forlorn, and capture your runaway charger; then I save you from the attack of a drunken ruffian. May I not style myself a second Don Quixote, and with your permission dub myself your faithful knight? I am afraid, though, that I cannot promise to make your name as renowned as that of the peerless Dulcinea del Toboso!’

My smile evidently pleased him, and feeling by this time a little revived, I rose from the bank to pursue my homeward way. As we walked together it struck me as a very singular coincidence that he should be able to come a second time to my assistance just at the right moment, and I expressed my surprise.

He coloured slightly, and replied, in a hesitating manner: ‘I may as well confess the truth. I saw you go into the cottage, and waited till you came out, hoping that you would allow me to see you home.’

‘But where were you? I never saw you.’

‘No; when the time came I was seized with a fit of modesty, and thought you might consider me impertinent if I forced my company upon you, so I

followed at a distance until, hearing your cries, I hurried to the rescue.'

'What a pity you did not come sooner! Why, if you had been with me that horrid wretch would never have dared to be so rude!'

'As you ensure me a welcome, I will certainly come another time. It was only respect for you which prevented me from joining you at once.'

Just as he finished speaking I saw Phoebe coming along the footpath, and at once I ran to meet her and told her what had happened.

'I've no doubt,' she exclaimed, 'it was that good-for-nothing Jack Hilton; he's always drinking now, making ducks and drakes of his money. He'll end his days in the workhouse, and that's the truth. I'll give it to him for frightening you like this!'

She then turned to Mr. Arnold, thanked him heartily for his kindness, and invited him to come into the house and take some refreshment. He declined, because of the lateness of the hour, and remarked: 'Your charge needs looking after, and I am sure she requires immediate rest.'

He could not forbear dropping this hint that I needed to be taken more care of; but Mrs. Smith answered easily, 'Well! I certainly did wonder what had become of her; that's why I came out.' Looking neither pleased nor satisfied with her reply, Mr. Arnold bade us good-bye and left us.

That night my dreams were full of encounters with drunken men, Mr. Arnold playing the rôle of preserver; and when I awoke in the morning I was vaguely conscious that something unpleasant had occurred. Yet this feeling was inexplicably mingled with a strange sense of happiness. I wondered as I

dressed whether I should see my new friend that day, and pondered over his words: 'As you ensure me a welcome, I will certainly come again.'

Phoebe remarked upon my pale cheeks when we met at breakfast; and after the meal was over, feeling shaky and unequal to any exertion, I took a book and went to sit in a field by the tiny stream which marked the boundary of Mrs. Smith's farm. I had been sitting there perhaps an hour when, looking up listlessly, I saw Mr. Arnold approaching. Somehow my feeling of dullness vanished, and I was able to welcome him cordially.

'The servant told me I should find you here, Miss Leigh. I trust you are none the worse for your fright of last evening?'

'Oh, no, thank you! I felt a little tired this morning, but I am all right now.'

'I am glad to hear it,' he remarked; and taking a seat on the rustic bench he began conversing with me about many things, but now and then mentioning some fact or other bearing on his family or his position. He told me that his father was a solicitor residing at Clifton, and that his elder brother was in partnership with him; while his sisters were all married, and he, the youngest of the family, was a Chancery barrister in London.

These confidences gradually drew me into talking of my experiences—how that I lived with my grandmother, a helpless invalid; that I had neither parents nor sisters, and only one brother, who was spending the summer in Switzerland. I did not, however, mention Mrs. Westbrook's name, as that subject was far too painful to discuss with a chance acquaintance.

He took up the book lying beside me, which happened

to be the second volume of Carlyle's *French Revolution*, his comments on it soon launching us on the inexhaustible topic of books and authors. It was an interesting conversation to me, for my companion knew infinitely more of men and letters than I did. His stay lasted over two hours, but I was not in the least wearied by it. After this, not a day passed when he did not join me in my walks and donkey-rides, or sit with me in the garden.

Phoebe seemed pleased that I had found a companion, for she was no longer afraid that I should find Silcote dull; and, still thinking of me as a child, and having little knowledge of the world, she allowed me to be with Mr. Arnold as much as I pleased.

I never stayed to ask myself what enchantment it was which made earth vocal with such strange melody, why the rustling of the trees and the murmur of the brooks sounded sweeter than ever before, or why the skies, though grey and lowering, seemed so pleasant to me. I did not attempt to analyse the source of this dreamy content, or I should have discovered the secret in the growing sweetness of my new friend's voice, and in the darkening and softening of a pair of grey eyes as they rested on my face. I simply let myself drift with the tide, until all at once Mrs. Smith awoke to the true condition of affairs.

The awakening came about in this way. It was barely three weeks since I had made Mr. Arnold's acquaintance, when one Sunday evening a heavy storm of wind and rain set in. Phoebe announced her intention of staying at home, and took it for granted that I should do the same; but I felt restless, and determined on going to the service whether she did or no.

'Miss Katie, it's not fit for you to go,' she remon-

strated ; 'the roads will be ankle-deep in mud, and you won't hear the usual preacher a night like this—it will be merely one of the members who will conduct the service.'

'Nevertheless I will go,' I answered.

'What can you want to go for?' Then, displeased with a suspicion that seemed to dawn upon her suddenly, she said, 'You'll catch your death of cold for certain. Why, I wouldn't turn a dog out on such a night!'

I had been a law to myself so long that I resented Phoebe's attempt at control, and merely repeating my determination, I went at once to put on my things. When I reached the mission-room there were only seven people assembled, Mr. Arnold entering soon after I was seated.

He looked surprised to see me, and said, 'What an evening for you to venture out! Your boots must be wet through.'

'No, indeed! my boots are very thick. I had them made on purpose for these lanes,' I replied.

'I am glad you were so sensible; but in spite of these wonderful boots I think you would have been wiser to stay indoors.'

As Mrs. Smith warned me, the service was wretchedly conducted. A man of meagre talent, but of boundless ambition, who was visiting in the village, had on his own recommendation been given the opportunity of saying a few words.

My thoughts soon wandered from the preacher's inanities to the reflection that it was only three short weeks since I first saw the man sitting by my side. Then he was a perfect stranger; now, thanks to Phoebe's manner, a sudden consciousness of what he had become to me shot through my heart and wellnigh overwhelmed

me. It may appear incredible, but up to this evening it had never occurred to me to think of him as anything more than a friend ; the thought of him as a possible lover had never entered my head. I had been accustomed to free and unrestrained intercourse with George Munro, and it had seemed quite natural to walk and talk in the same way with Mr. Arnold. Had he attempted to flatter me by look or word, I might have been on my guard ; but, far from paying me compliments, he behaved more like an elder brother. Lost in this train of thought, I started as the sermon came to an end ; and after the service was over I felt shy and uncomfortable at Mr. Arnold's presence, almost wishing that he would leave me to walk home alone.

This he had no intention of doing, for he took my umbrella from me in a most decided fashion, put up his own and held it over me. I had never seen him in better spirits, and my shyness gradually wore off as we discussed the strange sermon. When we reached Mrs. Smith's, he bade me good-night, adding, in a tone that made my heart beat fast, 'Do you know, you have made these past three weeks the happiest of my life ?'

I could not answer, but he seemed satisfied with my silence, and I went into the house with flushed cheeks and downcast eyes. Phoebe met me with the remark that she did not approve of young ladies walking about alone with gentlemen at such a time of night ; but I took little notice of her words, so absorbed was I in recalling my recent companion's words and expression.

The next morning she began again with generalities concerning propriety, evidently levelled at me in particular. Young ladies could never be too careful with strangers ; it was impossible to tell who they really were,

and it was unladylike to make oneself too cheap. I was offended, but I did my best to hide my feelings, for even supposing her advice was good, it came too late. It would be of little use locking the stable door when the steed was stolen. So I went out as usual and met Mr. Arnold.

When I returned Phoebe could not conceal her vexation, and she kept me with her through the remainder of the day. The next morning she said pointedly, 'I would not go out and meet that stranger again.'

I did as she wished, although greatly annoyed at her interference, and spent the morning at the piano. I had practised assiduously for some time, and had just struggled through a rather difficult song of Brahms's, when I heard Mr. Arnold's voice exclaiming, 'Thank you, Miss Leigh; you have indeed given me a treat!'

I turned quickly and saw him standing by the open window.

'May I come in?' he demanded, and scarcely waiting for permission he pushed up the sash and sprang lightly into the room.

'Whoever taught you to sing in this exquisite fashion?' he said inquiringly; 'you must have made good use of your time. But stay; I have another question to ask. How is it that you have not been out this lovely morning, nor yesterday afternoon or evening? I have been watching for you ever so long, so at last I determined to come in search of you.'

I felt dreadfully confused as he scanned my face and waited for an answer, but I did not wish him to suspect that Mrs. Smith had stopped me, so, as I could not truthfully say that I preferred staying indoors, I remained silent.

He waited an instant ; then, as I did not reply, he repeated his question. I murmured something about not having practised for a long time, but he interrupted me by saying, 'Well, never mind the reason, provided that you are not trying to avoid me. You have not stayed in because you are tired of my company ?'

I smiled as I replied, 'No, Mr. Arnold, that certainly is not the reason.'

'Then I am satisfied. And now, will you please favour me with a little more music—may I choose ? Ah, here are two favourites of mine which Titiens often sings at morning concerts.' He handed me the air 'Softly sighs' from *Der Freischütz*, and 'Home, Sweet Home.' When I had sung these, as he did not ask for any others, I rose from the piano and went and sat down on the sofa, where he joined me.

Mr. Arnold's presence had embarrassed me greatly, and knowing how irritated Phoebe would be if she discovered that he was in the house, I felt thoroughly uncomfortable. Neither did he seem at his ease ; he was preoccupied, his thoughts frequently wandering from the topic of conversation. Consequently there were frequent awkward pauses until, becoming conscious of this, he began a warm eulogy of my musical skill.

I was innocent of seeking a compliment, or of false modesty, when I replied that I had done my best to cultivate my one gift as I always considered it.

'Your one gift !' he exclaimed. 'What do you mean ? Why, I consider you really accomplished ; in fact, you are my ideal woman translated from cloudland into real life.'

Taken aback at this outburst, I was about to utter a faint protest, when he began, in low, rapid tones : 'You must have seen that I love you ! It seems to me now

that I live only to love you, for night and day you fill my thoughts to the exclusion of all else. Indeed, from the first moment I saw you it has been so. Miss Leigh, could you—do you love me?’ he asked, in a pleading voice.

I could not speak, I was so completely overwhelmed with this unexpected joy. ‘Look at me, my darling,’ he persisted, ‘and tell me you are not displeased at my presumption.’

I raised my eyes shyly to his, and the absence of any trace of displeasure in them gave him encouragement. With a sigh of relief he drew me towards him, put his arm round me, and kissed me passionately.

Ah me! I was strangely happy as my heart beat to the old, glad refrain, ‘I love my love, and my love loves me.’ It seemed as if I could hardly bear the weight of this exceeding joy.

Just then the dinner-bell rang, and I heard steps approaching. Freeing myself from my lover’s embrace I went to the piano and was arranging my music when Mrs. Smith entered.

‘Miss Katie, dinner is——’ she began, and then stopped abruptly, dumbfounded at seeing Mr. Arnold in the room with me. She took no care to conceal her annoyance from him, but, returning his greeting very coldly, she said pointedly to me: ‘Dinner is quite ready, Miss Leigh; we are waiting for you.’

Mr. Arnold rose at once and wished her good-morning. I accompanied him to the door, determined not to be deterred by Phoebe’s black looks; and as we walked through the hall together he whispered, ‘In spite of Mrs. Smith’s evident disapprobation, I shall return early this afternoon to try to extract from those dear lips a more definite answer than I have yet heard.’

While he spoke, a recollection of the duty I owed to grandmother and to Charlie overcame me. Could I, dare I, leave them? So I answered hesitatingly, 'There are serious obstacles, sacred ties, which I must tell you about when I see you again.'

'Serious obstacles, sacred ties!' he ejaculated. 'They must be serious indeed if they can separate us now! But I will hear all about them when I return.' And with a long, tender hand-clasp my lover left me.

CHAPTER X

A RUDE AWAKENING

DIRECTLY dinner was over I ran upstairs to change my dress, and then went into the garden to await the arrival of the one whom I now felt I had a right to term my lover. I had mentioned serious obstacles to him, but once more they faded from my mind as I sat wrapped in dreamy meditation, recalling his every word, look, and gesture. The happy refrain echoed sweetly in my heart—‘ I love my love, and my love loves me.’

Musing thus, the time slipped rapidly away, and I started when I heard the noise of wheels on the drive. Was it possible he could have returned already? My watch told me it was the hour when I might reasonably expect him ; but why was he driving instead of walking? The carriage drew up, and I saw to my surprise, not the dark hair and grave countenance of Mr. Arnold, but the fair, bright face of Charlie.

Directly he saw me he sprang out hastily, and in the unexpected pleasure of seeing my brother, who, I thought, was far away, I actually forgot my lover, as with mutual exclamations of joy we kissed and embraced each other.

I was struck with his manly appearance, and stood looking proudly at him, while he told the driver to take his luggage to the hotel and engage rooms for him there.

This detail having been arranged, I dragged him into the house that Phoebe might see and admire—which she did, even beyond my expectation. I must confess that I felt some trepidation at the prospect of presenting Mr. Arnold to him, but I comforted myself with the assurance that they could not fail to like each other on acquaintance.

I found that my brother had come back sooner than he had anticipated owing to the sudden death of Sir Reginald Ashton, which had caused his son Henry to return to England immediately, and had thus broken up the reading-party.

On arriving at Dover my brother had started at once for Westbrook Hall, and the next day he had ridden over to Charnham. Hearing from Miss Gregg that I had been very unwell, he decided to come and see for himself how I was progressing. He was really concerned, and told me that the news of my illness had given him a great fright; but that he was delighted to find me looking so well again.

I asked him how he had enjoyed his trip. 'Oh,' he replied, 'not half so much as I expected; the fellows were selfish—Ashton worse than any. I never really had a chance of doing what I liked.'

'What a comfort to think, Charlie,' I remarked teasingly, 'that you are so devoid of selfishness, and set such a good example to others!'

He interrupted me promptly by saying, 'I don't want any chaffing; I have had quite bad time enough, without that in addition.'

We chatted on for more than an hour, and I began to wonder why Mr. Arnold did not make his appearance. The time went on, the carriage returned to take my brother to the hotel to dine, and still no sign of my

promised caller. When Charlie came back to spend the evening with me, I was still alone, and vague apprehensions were worrying me. Could some accident have happened to my lover?

Then it occurred to me that possibly he had heard at the hotel of my brother's arrival, and had hesitated to intrude upon us on our first evening together. However, I thought, 'We shall meet in the morning,' and with this cheering conviction I laid my head on the pillow that night and fell asleep.

When my brother arrived the next morning, I had just returned from a short stroll, which, however, had been enlivened by no familiar voice or pleasant companionship, and I was more uneasy in mind than ever.

I was destined to receive an explanation of Mr. Arnold's behaviour very quickly, for Charlie's first remark was, 'You'll be glad to hear that I've got very decent quarters now at the "Golden Sheaf," though last night they were not up to much. A man named Arnold, who has been staying there some time, left this morning, and I am to have the rooms he occupied. I'm doubly glad he's gone, for he was a gloomy-looking fellow, and no mistake! I was at the bar last night talking to Miss James, the landlady's daughter, when he walked into the hall and scowled at me in passing. I'd never set eyes on him before, but I suppose I was poaching on his preserves, for the girl gave him a most fascinating smile, which he did not deign to notice.'

Whilst Charlie was narrating this incident—to him how trivial, to me how important!—a man began sharpening his scythe below the window. Many years have passed since that miserable morning, but whenever I hear the same sound a sickening feeling, amounting almost to agony, strikes through my heart. I wonder

half unconsciously what has happened, and in a moment that scene long past flashes across my memory. Once more I see my brother standing by my side, carelessly and unknowingly telling me how my lover had deserted me, and I recall vividly the calm beauty of that summer day, which at the time struck me with such a sense of incongruity. The agony has gone, but the scar from that dreadful wound I shall carry to my grave.

How I succeeded in retaining my self-possession I cannot tell, but with a tremendous effort I managed to say, in such a manner as to avoid rousing any suspicion in my brother, 'I do wish, Charlie, you would not laugh and talk with barmaids! I remember the time when you used to wonder what pleasure there could be in such a pastime.'

'My dearest sis!' he returned loftily, 'let me tell you I was a precious muff in those days.' Half-smiling he continued: 'I'm not the ignoramus I used to be! I've eaten a good lot of apples off the tree of knowledge since then, and could not go back to Eden again if I wished.'

That long, tedious day! However did I get through it? I ate scarcely anything, and excused myself to Phoebe and Charlie on the plea of a bad headache. The excuse was true enough—my head did ache terribly, but my heart ached infinitely worse.

I knew there was still a chance that Mr. Arnold might write explaining his strange conduct, but somehow I never expected a letter; instinct forbade the hope. My forebodings were verified, for neither letter nor message ever reached me. Oh that my instinct had played me as true in relation to his character! But it had failed me when most I needed its guidance.

That second night after Mr. Arnold's departure,

Phoebe came into my room just to see that I was safely 'tucked up,' as she said, and took the opportunity of making the following comment: 'Miss Katie, I'm right glad that Mr. Arnold has taken himself off. I never did like them barristering chaps; they are as poor as church rats, and as fond of flirting as bees of honey. Nothing good ever comes of them. This one certainly did seem a nice-spoken young gentleman, and certainly he settled up handsomely with Mrs. James before he left, which is more than some of them do! But he was after you far too much to please me, and now Master Charles has turned up, you see, he has taken himself off. He didn't mean to stay to be called to account for his goings-on—not he! It's a good thing, missie,' she concluded, as she kissed me and wished me good-night—'it's a good thing you'd too much sense to be taken in by him. Some girls would have cried their eyes out over him. As it is, there's no harm done, and I'll never mention his name again; he's not worth it.'

I devoutly hoped that my old nurse would keep her word, and was glad to find her convinced that I had escaped heart-whole. That was a crumb of comfort for which I was indeed profoundly thankful, and I resolved to use all the energy I possessed to keep my secret.

I had only a few more days to spend at Silcote, and how I longed to leave the place! It had become intolerable to me. Strive as I might, how could I forget my folly, when every lane and field conspired to remind me of my late companion's fickleness and my own pitiable credulity! The bitterest drop in my cup was the conviction that Mr. Arnold was by nature too kind-hearted to have bestowed such treatment on one

whom he considered a modest, well-behaved girl. From the readiness with which I had rushed into an intimacy with him, a perfect stranger, he evidently reckoned me 'fair game,' and had classed me, though of a different status, with such girls as Miss James at the 'Golden Sheaf'; with whom, no doubt, he had amused himself when not with me. Even Phoebe, who had no great talent for perception of character, had warned me plainly, though little to my liking, 'not to make myself too cheap'; but I would not be warned. Verily, I had paid the price of my own wilfulness!

I was well aware that society looked leniently on such flirtations, and only sneered if one side or the other were foolish enough to be taken in. But this was the first time that anything of the kind had happened to me, and in my inexperience I had blindly believed Mr. Arnold's protestations of love. He had seemed a man too proud and honourable to stoop to a mean or base action, and I had foolishly imagined that he would have sacrificed a great deal to his self-respect. Then, too, the manner in which he always treated religious subjects had riveted my confidence.

My cheeks burned, my ears tingled, and I loathed myself as I remembered all that had passed between us; the consciousness that a man lived who held me in light esteem nearly drove me frantic. My maiden pride had received a blow that humbled it in the dust. Again and again I was stabbed afresh by the cruel remembrance of his fond, false words, and fonder, falsier looks. My dreams tormented me inexpressibly, for in them he would appear a spotless Galahad, and once more his voice would softly whisper, 'I love you,' at which I would start, and wake to agonizing shame and misery.

My own concerns so occupied me that they prevented me from sorrowing as otherwise I must have done over the sad change in Charlie. Of course I grieved about him, but not acutely, for my faculties seemed benumbed by the shock I had received. In a dull, listless way I noticed that after the first excitement of seeing me was over his moods were fitful and he could settle to nothing. If I offered him a book or magazine he merely glanced at it, or more often declined it, saying, 'It is an awful bore reading such stuff; I prefer to find my own literature.'

I soon discovered that the reading to his taste was not the kind that could be shared with me. He shocked me too by saying, 'I've done with the Bible, it is quite out of date; but I have no wish to disturb your faith. Women are never happy without some superstition to cling to; but personally I cannot pretend to believe in miracles and such nursery tales, they are too ridiculous. Men of sense have long since swept away such old cobwebs.' On another occasion he remarked that grandfather had made a tremendous mistake in choosing for our most intimate friends a shopkeeper's niece and a small farmer's son, and that it was a great pity I could not hit it off with the old lady, as then I might have a chance of seeing some society.

I answered quietly that grandfather's faith and grandfather's friends were quite good enough for me; whereupon my brother, detecting from my tone that he had given me pain, never returned to these subjects again in my hearing.

My poor boy, how dearly I loved him! And I had good reason for so doing: he was never anything but kind and affectionate to me. He was generous to

our old nurse, who thought the world of him, and constantly expatiated to me on his handsome form and winning ways.

Just before we left Silcote, Charlie and I took counsel together as to what we should give Phoebe, and we finally decided to buy the piano she had so thoughtfully hired for me. I knew that she longed for her little girl to learn music. She was enraptured with our gift, and when we came to say good-bye she wept bitterly, and seemed as though she could not let us go. I was sorry to have to leave her, though she had not proved the congenial companion that my childhood's impressions had led me to picture ; but this was more than counter-balanced by my now extended realization of the goodness which she had shown us as children.

Charlie travelled home with me and stayed the night in Charnham, but early next day he returned to Westbrook Hall. At last I had my heart's desire, and was practically alone. Of course grandmother, in her weak state of mind, noticed no change in me, and Miss Gregg and Christine put down any alteration they discerned to my recent illness, and to the anxiety they knew I felt about Charlie. Stories, partly true and little to his credit, were now circulating widely in Charnham ; and some misguided folks were ready enough to tell me that people were commonly saying 'Young Westbrook is turning out just such another scapegrace as his grandfather before him.'

Dr. Brown vainly remonstrated with him, and one day he remarked sorrowfully to me : 'My only consolation is that I have done what I thought right. I would never have stirred in the matter but for your grandfather's express wish.' I had not the heart to challenge his statement.

I attempted to settle to the way of life which, until now, had amply satisfied me; but I found myself face to face with a creature so absolutely unlike my past self, that I could almost have believed in a doctrine of transmigration of souls during life. I had changed to a weary woman with an aching heart, one to whom the whole round of existence was flat and uninteresting, and whose natural elasticity of mind had totally disappeared in the reaction from exultant joy to shame and sorrow. Again and again I asked myself, 'Is it possible that I am the same girl who only a few weeks ago was full of interest in all manner of things?'

After a time I grew ashamed of yielding tamely to my grief, and made strenuous efforts to rouse myself from this miserable brooding over the past. It was ignoble, it was disgraceful, to waste my life mourning over a man who had neither loved nor respected me, and I determined to do so no longer.

Under the stress of these newly awakened feelings I prepared a grave, in which I buried my ill-starred love, and heaped over its luckless form all my old faith and dreams of happiness, boldly declaring that this dead past should haunt me no longer. Alas! I had not gauged the strength of memory and affection. From that grave would arise again and again a tall form, a beloved face, and the sound of a voice to whose witchery I had too willingly yielded, still claiming me as its own. But, having begun the conflict, I would not surrender, although the struggle was so fierce that I became at last mentally exhausted, and almost incapable of reflection. Of course outwardly I tried to assume a cheerfulness that I did not feel; but in spite of my efforts Christine Nicholson detected that something was

greatly amiss with me. Naturally she thought that anxiety on Charlie's account was affecting my health and spirits, and no doubt this added to my depression.

One day when we happened to be alone, she said to me lovingly, 'My dear Katie, you will be crushed under this burden if you make the mistake of keeping it and your religion as things apart. What is religion worth if it does not aid us when we most need its help? Try "Casting all your care upon Him, for He careth for you." I know from my own experience how true these words are, and you can prove their preciousness and truth for yourself.'

The tone in which she repeated the words went straight to my heart, and the realization of such a source of succour acted like balm to my wounded spirit.

What Christine had said was true : I was keeping my sorrow and religion as things apart. But from that day I determined afresh to link my life with the Lord of Life, and to cast my burden on Him. As a result, peace and joy returned to me, and my life, which had seemed so devoid of motive and so dreary, assumed a new aspect, and my languor gradually disappeared. It is true I sorrowed sometimes, but I gradually settled to a contented view of life. Ultimately I came to realize that my lot was appointed for me by an all-wise and all-loving Father.

CHAPTER XI

JOB'S COMFORTERS AND WITHERED ROSES

I WAS looking out of the window one morning, about six weeks after my return from Silcote, when I saw Mr. Munro and Mr. Baker, two of the deacons of our little chapel, approaching the house.

It was a curious fact, fully recognized by the community, that when the former appeared alone it signified just an ordinary conventional call; but that when he was accompanied by the latter—popularly known as his sheep-dog—it signified that there was church business or discipline to be discoursed upon. I began to wonder what had brought upon me this joint visitation.

The two men presented an absurd contrast in appearance and manner as they entered the room where I was seated. Mr. Munro loomed large to the view, a broad-shouldered, weather-beaten man, who could plough the straightest furrow of anybody in the parish; and one who could get out of his land better results than any other farmer in the district. He was fond of books, but despised all works of fiction. Narrow in his theology and religious practice, he was nevertheless able to take a common-sense view of what was going on in the world around him. Mr. Baker, on the contrary, was a delicate, silent little man, rather long in the face and neck, with sloping shoulders, uncertain legs, and a falsetto voice.

An ironmonger by trade, he was punctual, honest, and industrious. His income would have been larger had not his shop on the market-place been the resort of all the impecunious people whose credit had become exhausted elsewhere. He loved to be a follower rather than a leader ; he adored his senior deacon, and sat at his feet as though he were a second Gamaliel.

Mr. Munro, after shaking hands coldly and formally with me, ensconced himself in a large arm-chair, and, assuming his solemn church-meeting manner, said, in measured tones, 'I have learned to my surprise, Miss Leigh, that you have deliberately broken the rules of our church, and communed with the Open Zionists when away in Somerset. May I ask if I have been rightly informed?'

'You are quite right. The people of whom you speak were earnest Christians, and I do not see any harm in what I have done.'

A groan of distress came from Mr. Munro, with the accompaniment of a sigh from Mr. Baker, who was timidly balancing himself on the edge of his chair. Then the former proceeded to administer this stern rebuke: 'Miss Leigh, when you made a profession of faith, and were admitted into fellowship with our church, it was not that you might follow carnal promptings, but that in conjunction with the rest of the brethren you should earnestly contend for the faith once committed to the saints. Open Zionists are not only shamefully lax in their discipline, but they have fallen into grievous doctrinal error.'

I did not wish to enter into an argument either on ordinances or on doctrines; I saw at once that I had acted wrongly in not obeying the laws of the church of which I was a member, so I answered frankly: 'I am

sorry to have broken the rules of our membership by communing with these people ; in future I will endeavour to observe them more strictly, though I have little sympathy with such exclusiveness.'

The deacons groaned again in their respective keys, and Mr. Munro resumed, in a more chilling manner : 'As you promise, Miss Leigh, to observe our rules in future, we will let the matter rest and not bring it before the church ; but I cannot refrain from telling you how shocked I am at the opinions you have expressed. The church has fallen on evil days, a dangerous spirit of laxity and insubordination is abroad among the younger members ; it remains for us older saints, Brother Baker, to stand fast in one spirit, with one mind, striving together for the faith of the gospel, and protesting against error while life and breath remain.'

Deacon Baker gave a murmur of approval, and Mr. Munro continued : 'I cannot say that Miss Leigh's latitudinarianism, sad as it is, surprises me, for she has been trained in such habits of thought by her departed grandfather ; but it is a mysterious dispensation that my son George, rigidly educated by myself, should have erred and strayed even farther than she has done. He doggedly persists in his evil courses, and now communes constantly at an open table, where doubtless even Roman Catholics would be welcome. Yes,' he added, speaking bitterly and with passion, 'heedless of his father's tears and prayers, blinded by the great adversary of souls, he has quitted our sister church at Corrington, because, forsooth ! he finds its services cold and uninteresting. At our next church meeting he is to be cast forth out of our midst as a rotten branch. Would to God I had never consented to his leaving Charnham ! Nor would I have done it, had I not known that he

could enjoy in Corrington equal light and privilege with ourselves. But enough, enough !' he ejaculated, as he rose angrily ; ' I see plainly that Miss Leigh has no sympathy with a father sorrowing over the backslidings of a beloved son. Let us depart, Friend Baker ; but first one word of warning, Miss Leigh. Let me tell you plainly that I am not satisfied with your spiritual condition. Search the Scriptures constantly and prayerfully ; strive to become sound in the faith, so that you may prove an element of strength and not of weakness to your brethren.'

They then shook hands with me even more stiffly than on their entrance, and departed, to my great relief.

It was not to be wondered at that, when George paid his next visit to Charnham, he did not find his father a very genial companion ; and when his mother also gave clear evidence of her displeasure he withdrew, as much as was possible without giving direct offence, from their society. After this he spent most of his time at the Nicholsons', who always made him welcome ; and there I found him when I called one day to see Christine.

As we were chatting together Mr. Nicholson put his head into the parlour and invited us into the shop to see a curious engraving he had just unpacked. It was a dull winter's afternoon, and the light having begun to fade, we went to the door in order to do justice to this work of art. Mr. Nicholson was directing our attention to some of its peculiar features when, looking up suddenly, I perceived two men coming—not too steadily—down the street, laughing and talking in an excited manner. There seemed something familiar about the appearance of one of them, and as they came nearer, to my horror it proved to be Charlie ! Instinctively I drew back.

The stranger now caught sight of Christine's fair face, and made some remark about her to my brother, whereupon he put up his eyeglass and stared deliberately at the three in the doorway. Without giving the slightest sign of recognition he leisurely passed the shop, and thus cut them dead. As they passed I heard his companion say, 'What a stunning girl that is, Westbrook, and no mistake! By Jove! I wish'—but what he wished was lost to us. Mr. Nicholson, who was short-sighted and absent-minded, had pushed his spectacles above his eyebrows the better to examine his prized engraving, and was quite unconscious of what had happened. Not so George. Almost beside himself with rage at this deliberate insult, he stepped forward, with teeth set and clenched fists, as though he would call the snobbish offender to account; but if such were his intention it was frustrated by Christine falling in a dead faint at his side. George raised her from the floor and laid her on a couch in the sitting-room, where she soon recovered consciousness, and murmured something about being tired and overdone.

I did not faint, though I felt acutely the cruel conduct of my brother. Disgust and anger seethed together within me, and for the first time in my life I despised Charlie from the bottom of my heart.

As soon as Christine recovered I rose to go. George accompanied me to the door, and, notwithstanding the fact that I was sister to the one who had acted so basely, he pressed my hand and said, 'Kate, this will make no difference to our friendship.' I gave him a grateful look, but did not trust myself to reply.

On my arrival home I was none too pleased to find Charlie waiting for me.

'What an age you've been!' he exclaimed irritably;

I've been here ever so long, and now I have to meet Ashton in ten minutes.'

I controlled myself, though I was burning with anger and shame, and replied coolly: 'I was standing at Mr. Nicholson's shop door just now, and had the pleasure of seeing what an adept you have become in the art of cutting old and unfashionable acquaintances. I dare say it will not be long before you will find it desirable to treat your sister in the same way!'

These words stung him to the quick; he swore terribly, and replied in a passion: 'Next time I take the trouble to come and see you I hope you may be in a better temper, but it will be long enough before I trouble you again!' and he rushed to the door.

It was clear to me that he had taken more wine than he ought. The recollection, however, that this was the first serious quarrel we had ever had overcame me; and forgetting his iniquities, I realized only that my own brother and old playmate was leaving me in bitter anger. I ran to him impetuously, put my arms round his neck, and besought him to be friends with me again.

He returned my kisses impulsively, and, drawing me to him, said hoarsely, 'Katie, I'm a good-for-nothing wretch, but don't turn against me, or I shall go to the bad entirely! I know I am a horrid sneak, and nothing can excuse me; but the fact is, when I first went to Cambridge I was fool enough to let Ashton know I cared for some girl in Charnham, and he's been at me ever since to know who it was. I should never have heard the last of it had I bowed to Christine. He'd have spotted her instantly, and I don't want her talked about as those fellows talk. I must confess also I was ashamed of owning old

Nicholson and Munro as friends, and that's the long and the short of it. Good-bye, dear; make the best of me you can!'

When he had gone I sat down and cried bitterly over the thought that this was what my once generous and true-hearted brother had come to. He could without a qualm throw over old, trusted friends for such as Ashton and his set.

I tried to excuse him on the ground that he was not perfectly sober, or he would not have acted so meanly; but such excuse only gave rise to deeper anxiety on my part.

Next time I saw him he told me he had met Munro, and had attempted to apologize; but that the latter had scowled and pushed past him so rudely that he had desisted.

I urged him to write, but he refused, saying, 'After all, perhaps things are better as they are, and we may never come across each other again.'

I question whether, if Charlie had apologized, George would have accepted his apology. He had witnessed the marked attention Charlie had paid Christine in the past, he was conscious that she loved him, and he saw with the utmost resentment the affection which he would have died to win flung back as worthless. Not content with this, Charlie had now added insult to injury. An insult to himself George might have forgiven, but to Christine, never! From this time he detested my brother so thoroughly that he never suffered his name to escape his lips.

That Christine did not share these resentful feelings I discovered accidentally. She was painting one morning in a room which we grandly designated 'The Studio,' whilst I sat sewing beside her. Presently, having

finished the cotton I was using for my embroidery, I asked her if she could give me a skein. She was deeply engaged at the moment, and pointing to a bureau told me I should find what I wanted in the left-hand drawer. Absent-mindedly confusing left with right, I pulled open the wrong drawer, and in turning over its contents in search of the cotton I pushed the paper covering from a parcel that lay there. As I lifted the parcel to wrap it up again my eye fell upon its contents—a water-colour sketch of Charlie, some withered roses, and some letters which had been twisted up instead of being sent in envelopes.

Involuntarily I uttered a cry of surprise. Christine turned, recognized the packet, and in a moment she had sprung from her seat, snatched it out of my hand, and flung the parcel into the fire. Then, without uttering one word, she went back to her painting, though her hand trembled so that she could scarcely hold the brush.

I felt wretched. Unwittingly I had spied into her private concerns; nor could I disguise from myself the significance of what I had seen. After a minute or two Christine came over to where I still stood, and, kissing me affectionately, exclaimed, 'Don't say anything; that would be the kindest thing you could do. You are not to blame in the least; it was pure accident.'

It may appear strange that we had not made each other confidantes of our respective love affairs after the usual fashion of girls; but Christine had been prevented from doing so by the fact of my being Charlie's sister, and I had never been tempted to relate even to my dearest friend my disastrous experience at Silcote. Now matters had changed; I had come into possession of her secret, and it seemed only fair that she should

know mine. So I began hesitatingly, 'Christine, I have something I would like to tell you.'

She stopped me instantly, fearing perhaps that I was going to speak of Charlie. 'No; tell me nothing, I will not hear it!' and she began to talk so energetically on various subjects that my courage failed. Consequently the opportunity passed, never to return, for not long afterwards the Nicholsons removed from Charnham.

Of late Mr. Nicholson's health had been failing, and he had made up his mind as soon as a good opportunity presented itself to retire from business. Just at this time a favourable combination of circumstances assisted his plans: he received a suitable offer for the goodwill of his business, and a house which had belonged to his mother at Waring Green, a village in Lancashire, was unexpectedly thrown on his hands. One person at least—George Munro—was charmed at his decision to move to Waring Green, seeing that it was barely fifteen miles from the town of Corrington, where he resided with his uncle. This would enable him to visit the Nicholsons as often as he chose.

What was a gain to George meant a loss to me; I missed my old friends sorely. Christine, too, felt the separation keenly, and our one consolation lay in the thought of the long visit I had promised to pay her in the following autumn. The possibility of her coming to stay with me was never hinted at; I knew too well that she would never enter a house where she might risk meeting my brother.

CHAPTER XII

A STATE OCCASION AT WESTBROOK

AT the commencement of the long vacation Charlie returned from Cambridge far from well, and as he rapidly grew worse a doctor was called in, who pronounced his patient to be suffering from typhoid fever.

When Mrs. Westbrook learned this she at once sent an urgent request that I would come and look after him, as she was too old and feeble to do so herself. She proposed that the carriage should call for me later in the day. I need scarcely say that I readily complied. Had I needed urging, the necessary stimulus would have been afforded by a pencilled scrawl she had enclosed from Charlie in which he said, 'I want you badly.'

I counted the hours till the carriage arrived, and even when we were on the way it seemed as if I should never reach Westbrook Hall, so slowly did the horses appear to travel. When at length we reached our destination, I entered the house, weighed down with anxiety, notwithstanding which I could not help my attention being involuntarily arrested by the display of wealth and luxury which surrounded me.

Powdered footmen in livery stood waiting to conduct me through the immense hall crowded with tropical plants and marble statues, the marble floor of which

was covered here and there with rich Oriental rugs. The room in which I found my grandmother was just as gorgeously appointed. The walls were panelled in white satin, painted in various designs, and the windows were hung with richly embroidered silken draperies. But the costly furniture, the gilded mirrors, and the bric-à-brac of every description, added to the oppressive scent of banks of flowers, wearied me; there was no repose for the eye anywhere, and I sighed for the simple comfort and comparative plainness of my own home.

This unfavourable first impression remained with me. The more I saw of the place, the more I disliked its aggressive splendour. The table, with its lavish profusion of viands and wines, and the sideboard, loaded with plate, bore witness to the fact—by no means interesting to every class of mind—that money was ‘no object’ to the owner of Westbrook Hall. The whole establishment seemed to have been handed over with unlimited freedom in expenditure to some second-rate upholsterer. As for the pictures, and the meretricious style of the marble statues, they irritated me to the last degree.

Now I understood why Charlie had never praised it : he had lived with grandfather, who was a man of refined tastes, long enough to have imbibed some of his ideas. A few choice pictures, good engravings, and books, purchased not merely to fill up gaps but for constant enjoyment, had been his treasures ; and these he had valued more for their intrinsic worth than for their cost. The colour schemes of his rooms, as well as his furniture, had testified to his personal supervision ; in all the appointments his cultivated taste had ever been manifest. The acute and sympathetic observer could have easily

discovered from his Penates the manner of man Dr. Leigh was.

When the servant threw open the door of the apartment and announced my name, Mrs. Westbrook at once rose and came forward. To my surprise she kissed me affectionately, and in kinder accents than I had ever heard from her, bade me welcome to Westbrook Hall. Evidently she had determined to ignore my past transgression in refusing to take up my abode with her.

I soon discovered the cause of her unexpected cordiality, and liked her better for it. She knew I was passionately attached to my brother; he was her idol too, and in her present anxiety she longed for a sympathetic companion. It was mutual affection for him drawing us more closely together than I could have conceived possible. Fortunately she was not jealous of the love we bore to one another, and was willing that I should be with him as much as possible. After a few minutes' conversation she took me herself to his room, where a trained nurse opened the door to us. As I advanced softly to the bedside the poor boy raised his heavy eyelids. Seeing me standing by him, he was almost beside himself with joy, and talked so fast and excitedly that I had to threaten to leave him unless he became quieter.

He smiled faintly and said, 'Well, I suppose I'm at your mercy now, so I may as well start being obedient at once.' With that he ceased talking, and soon after fell into a restless sleep.

I speedily found that no real nursing was to fall to my lot, as a night nurse had also been engaged; and though I remonstrated, and begged to be allowed at least to share the responsibility, both grandmother and Charlie told me there was no need for me to wear

myself out unnecessarily. Each day my brother would dismiss me peremptorily for a long walk or drive; and throughout his tedious illness he was so patient and considerate to us all, that it was hard to realize he had led so wild a life during the last year or two.

After the fever had subsided, he would lie quiet for hours, satisfied if I held his wasted hand in mine. But at other times, especially on my return from my prescribed constitutional, I noticed that he seemed wrapped in painful thought. One day I came back sooner than usual, and heard him groaning. Poor lad! his mind was evidently ill at ease. Taking his hand I said, 'Charlie, cannot I help you? You are not happy!'

'You are my greatest helper, Katie,' he replied, with a loving look; 'but even you cannot help me where I most need help. I wish I could go back to the faith of my childhood, but it has slipped away, and everything seems dark. I can tell you,' he went on quickly and abruptly, 'when a fellow is haunted day and night by the evil things he has said and done, he does need comfort. You shall help me in one thing, though. I'm awfully in debt through gambling and betting; a lot of bills and I.O.U.'s will be falling due, and I've nothing to meet them with. Write and ask Dr. Brown to come and see me; perhaps he will advance me the necessary money from grandfather's property, which falls to me when I come of age. Anyway I'll try him, for I don't want to have anything to do with money-lenders.'

'I should think not,' I answered; 'but why not ask grandmother? She is very rich, and would gladly help you, I'm sure.'

'Yes, I know that well enough; she has paid my debts over and over again, but I don't intend to bother her this time.'

‘Well, I will write to Dr. Brown if you like, and ask him to come and see you. Shall I fix to-morrow? You are stronger now, and the sooner this matter is off your mind the better.’

The vicar came promptly in answer to my letter, and as Charlie preferred to see him alone, I left them together. Their conversation lasted a long time, their voices growing gradually louder and more earnest; and knowing that my brother was still weak and unfit for any excitement I became very uneasy, and was just on the point of interrupting them, when the vicar came out of Charlie’s room. Taking my hand in his he said cheerfully, ‘Dear child, I have good news for you. Charlie has been telling me that with God’s help he will turn over a new leaf,’ and the tears stood in my old friend’s eyes.

This was indeed good news, but when I returned to my brother I was alarmed to find his face flushed and his eyes unnaturally bright. As I entered he called out excitedly, ‘What do you think, Katie? Dr. Brown insists on paying my debts! I can do nothing with him, and he has made me promise not to go to money-lenders. He says that if I had not come here I should never have got into these scrapes, and he must do his best to atone for his error of judgement by helping me out of them. He won’t advance me a penny of my own. What can I do?’

‘Do as I first suggested—tell grandmother. I would certainly take her money rather than his.’

‘That’s just how I feel about it. Ask her to come now, and I will tell her everything.’

Grandmother came and listened placidly to Charlie’s confession, until he mentioned our friend’s generous offer; then she interrupted him haughtily. ‘A mon-

strous thing indeed ! To think of that vicar offering to pay my grandson's debts ! What is the world coming to ! You can have whatever money you want from me, Charlie ; there is no need to go begging outside.' A welcome glimmering of reason now seemed to inspire her, and she laid her withered hand on my brother's shoulder. 'Do give up gaming and drinking, my boy,' she pleaded, 'or you will end like your grandfather and your poor Uncle Augustus.'

'Grannie, that's just what I mean to avoid. Still, you know the saying, "When the devil was ill, the devil a monk would be." In my present condition I had better perhaps not make too many promises.'

'Hush !' she said fondly ; 'get well as fast as you can. Whatever you want I will give you, and remember, I will never consent to your receiving help from any living creature except myself !'

Charlie was of course much exhausted by the excitement of these two interviews, but any bad effects were soon lost in a tranquillity of mind that materially conduced to his recovery. When he was convalescent, though still confined to his room, Mrs. Westbrook invited her god-daughter Alicia Spencer, a fashionable London beauty, to spend a few weeks at the Hall, saying that it would be more cheerful for me to have a companion of my own age. She had often talked to me about her, but from all she had said I did not imagine for one moment that we should prove congenial associates ; and so it turned out. Miss Spencer's head was full of flirtations and offers, and within twenty-four hours she had imparted to me the history of all her numerous admirers. I had never been thrown into the society of persons of this type before, so that I often felt at a loss what to say. I had no similar con-

fidences to relate, even had I desired to do so ; hence our conversation frequently languished, and I have no doubt she set me down as an intolerably stupid country girl. But though there was little I admired in her tone, her outward appearance delighted me.

She was indeed beautiful, a splendid dark-eyed, dark-browed beauty, with wavy masses of bright chestnut hair coiled round her shapely head, whilst her figure and carriage were superb. Usually she was vivacious and high-spirited, but after a week spent in no other society than that of grandmother and myself, she became depressed, and openly lamented Charlie's seclusion as the cause of the unbearable dullness of the place. Her spirits revived when Sir Henry Ashton returned home and took to calling frequently, ostensibly to inquire after Charlie's welfare, though in reality to renew a flirtation commenced with Alicia on her last visit to Westbrook Hall.

Charlie was not yet allowed to see visitors, so for some little time I managed to avoid meeting Sir Henry by taking refuge in my brother's room ; and I cherished a secret hope that with care I might escape seeing him altogether. This hope was unfortunately not destined to be fulfilled. One morning Charlie laughingly informed me that I now stood so high in grandmother's good graces that she had invited several people to stay at the Hall as in the old days, and had issued invitations for three dinner-parties on purpose to introduce me into society. This news made me apprehensive. I turned to my brother for consolation, but instead of giving me sympathy he only remarked affectionately, 'My dear sis, you've been shut up with me quite long enough, and I'm anxious to see you in one of those choice Parisian gowns.'

The dresses he alluded to had been given me by my grandmother, together with hosts of other things. When once she had discovered the modest extent of my wardrobe she had immediately sent for her London dress-maker, to whom she gave *carte-blanche* to fit me out with everything requisite for the dignified position of Miss Westbrook of Westbrook Hall, as she was now pleased to call me. She herself selected the dress I should wear at her first dinner-party, and bestowed on me a beautiful set of pearls to mark my entrance into society ; and really, when the eventful night arrived and my toilet was completed, I hardly recognized my usual sober self in the figure I saw reflected in the mirror.

I had promised to show myself to Charlie before I went downstairs. With boyish glee he called me 'an awful swell,' and we laughed and talked, oblivious of time, until a servant came to tell me that all the guests had arrived and dinner was served. I was ashamed of being late, and with burning cheeks I entered the drawing-room. Fortunately for me, Mrs. Westbrook was standing near the door. 'My dear,' she remarked, 'you are so devoted to your brother that you forget time and everything else for him. Let me introduce you to Colonel Mowbray, who will take you in to dinner.'

The tall, handsome middle-aged man, with grizzled hair and moustache, who offered me his arm, proved to be an exceedingly pleasant companion ; so much so, that I enjoyed my first state dinner far more than I could have imagined possible.

There was, however, one drawback to my pleasure. Sir Henry Ashton, my *bête noire*, sat directly opposite, and stared at me so persistently from under his drooping eyelids that he made me quite uncomfortable. He had taken Alicia Spencer in to dinner ; but,

occupied in rudely gazing at me, he was paying her little attention. This naturally annoyed her, and when she discovered the cause of his abstraction she darted such resentful glances at me that I felt sure I had made an enemy of her.

When the ladies retired and we were crossing the hall, Mrs. Westbrook tapped me on the cheek with her fan and said playfully, 'Sir Henry has just complimented me on the possession of so lovely a granddaughter, and has begged for an introduction; what do you say?'

Overhearing the remark, Alicia whispered maliciously, 'My dear Katherine! for a would-be *ingénue* you certainly are perfect in the art of entering a room just at the right moment. You made quite a sensation as the affectionate sister, forgetful of everything but her sick brother.'

I did not reply to this taunt. In the drawing-room grandmother presented me formally to her friends; but as soon as possible I escaped upstairs to see how Charlie was getting on, and begged him to let me stay with him for the rest of the evening. He would not hear of it for one moment, and sent me back to the drawing-room much sooner than I desired.

As I passed Alicia, she said suavely, 'You are just in time, dear; the gentlemen will be here immediately'; and she was quite right, for I had hardly taken my seat when they entered the room. Colonel Mowbray was one of the first comers, and looked about till he discovered me in a corner, whereupon he crossed the room to talk to me. We were not left undisturbed for long; Sir Henry Ashton soon came to claim his promised introduction from my grandmother, and drawing his chair close up to mine, he began discoursing

so volubly and familiarly that I found him even more detestable than I had imagined. After a few minutes Colonel Mowbray rose and left him in undisputed possession of the field, for which I did not thank him.

‘I’m precious glad that old fogey has got a glimmering of sense after all,’ said Sir Henry, glancing after the colonel; ‘he’s found out pretty soon that two’s company and three’s none. How jolly it is having you all to myself in this corner!’ He then proceeded to overwhelm me with compliments, never doubting that this would prove acceptable to a little country miss; but what vexed me the most was the certainty that he was attributing my extreme coldness and irresponsiveness to shyness and natural modesty, for such an idea as that I could really dislike his attentions never entered his head. I learnt afterwards that he had been tremendously run after by mothers and daughters.

Our *tête-à-tête* became every moment more and more intolerable: I felt repelled by the unmistakable admiration in his looks and speech, and I had just made up my mind to endure it no longer, when Colonel Mowbray returned and requested me to show him the conservatories. I jumped up eagerly and accompanied him, leaving my hateful companion in a fit of the sulks.

It was a relief to find myself once more with an intelligent man who could talk sensibly without flattering. The colonel had travelled a great deal in China, Japan, and South America; and he had some very interesting things to tell about the plants that surrounded us during a very happy quarter of an hour.

When we returned to the drawing-room Alicia met us and very graciously asked me to sing. Mrs. Westbrook, no doubt afraid of my disgracing myself by a poor

schoolgirl performance, interposed: 'No, Alicia, we will not trouble Katherine to-night; she is quite worn out with attending on our invalid. You play or sing something yourself.'

Alicia looked decidedly disappointed and disconcerted at grandmother's interference; but as it was a matter of indifference to me whether I sang or not, I was about to decline, when I saw Sir Henry making straight for me. Feeling that anything was preferable to his society, to Mrs. Westbrook's surprise and chagrin I said, 'Oh, I am not tired, grandmother: I am never too tired to sing.'

As I went to the piano I saw that Alicia's face beamed with delight, and it suddenly struck me that she had no more idea than grandmother that I had been trained, if only for a short time, at the Conservatoire at L——. Doubtless she expected that I should make an exhibition of myself before the assembled guests. The very first notes of my song produced a dead silence, and I secured the attention of my audience. When I rose from the piano I was overwhelmed with compliments by every one but Alicia. In response to a general request I sang again; but as I did not wish to monopolize the company, I refused to comply with numerous entreaties for just one more song. As I persisted in refusing, Colonel Mowbray asked Alicia to play, but she quickly and almost rudely refused. Sir Henry, much to my disgust, forced his way to my side and expressed his delight at the treat I had given them; nor would he leave me until the last of our visitors had departed.

The moment I was free I ran upstairs to Charlie, half expecting to find him asleep as it was so late, but the nurse met me at his door, saying, 'Mr. Westbrook will

not settle till he has seen you, miss.' I had not been with him five minutes when grandmother joined us in high good-humour, and full of the sensation I had caused.

'I shall make your sister quite vain,' she said to Charlie, 'if I tell her all the fine things said about her this evening. She took me quite by surprise with her splendid voice. She really sings better than any amateur I have ever heard. I was truly sorry for poor Alicia; she was dreadfully neglected, for neither Sir Henry nor Colonel Mowbray, who is generally considered so unimpressionable, would speak or look at any one but Katherine. I have quite resolved she shall spend next season in London with me, and I should not wonder if she becomes the talk of the City.'

After a few more declarations in the same strain grandmother bade us good-night, and then Charlie said chaffingly, 'It seems you have taken me in, young lady. I thought you the demurest little mouse, now I hear of two conquests in one evening—both most eligible bachelors. You are insatiable, indeed!'

I felt distressed at this style of badinage. 'What do you mean by conquests?' I inquired. 'Surely you don't mean that Colonel Mowbray and Sir Henry are in love with me? That would be dreadful!'

Charlie burst out laughing unsympathetically. 'You dear little innocent! You needn't trouble your head about those fellows. Ashton is the greatest flirt going, though some day he'll get dropped on for breach of promise; and Mowbray is a notoriously non-marrying man. So make your heart easy; they are taken by a fresh face—that's all.'

The opinion Charlie expressed set my mind at rest. I felt confident that he knew the ways of his sex better

than I, and the experience I had bought so dearly at Silcote harmonized with what he said. I felt I had been too easily alarmed, but I had long made up my mind never to inflict on any man the same kind of suffering as I had endured at the hands of Mr. Arnold.

I went to my room in a contented frame of mind, but the maid had only just begun to unfasten my ornaments when there flashed across my mind the thought of what a conceited wretch Charlie would consider me for fancying that two men could fall in love with me at first sight; so I rushed helter-skelter back to his room, and arrived at his bedside almost breathless. 'My dear girl,' he remonstrated, 'do you think I have no nerves? What do you mean by tearing about in this mad way? Remember a poor invalid is soon upset. Some confession to make—another conquest, eh?'

I knelt down beside him and whispered, 'I am downright ashamed of myself, and I couldn't have slept a wink to-night with the thought worrying me that I had given you to imagine I really believed those men to have been in love with me. I didn't, really, Charlie! It was what you and grandmother said that put such suggestions into my head.'

'Katie,' he said gravely, 'never be afraid of my misunderstanding you. I know your character better than I do my own. I don't credit Sir Henry with enough good taste to appreciate you, darling; and as for Colonel Mowbray, all the world knows he mourns a dead love.' Then his manner changed again, and he added: 'Come now, be off, and let your poor sick brother have some sleep. If you intend to keep vigil he does not.' Having given him a sisterly embrace I went back to my room satisfied.

CHAPTER XIII

AN INSUFFERABLE BOOR

THE next day Miss Ashton, accompanied by Sir Henry, called upon me. I found her a quiet, gentle girl, who reminded me in some ways of her father, while in manners and appearance she was certainly a decided contrast to her brother.

After a few minutes' conversation, in obedience to a glance from her brother, she pressed me to visit her at Ashton Priory, which invitation he warmly seconded. I declined on the ground that I could not think of leaving Charlie, whereupon Sir Henry said pointedly, 'You give me another reason for ardently desiring the recovery of my friend; it would afford me much gratification to have you as a guest under my roof.'

Whatever gratification it might give to him, I was certain it would cause the reverse to me, and I was very thankful to be able to postpone the evil day, hoping that with a little tact the visit might be avoided altogether.

Sir Henry proved as tiresome and pertinacious in his attention to me as on the preceding evening, and as evidently he was still labouring under the delusion that my coolness of manner arose merely from shyness, I felt that the time had come for me to enlighten him by more direct tactics. By dint of repeated snubs I did

manage at last to keep him at a distance, and to lessen his familiarity.

Slowly the idea worked into his dull brain that I was not quite so charmed with him as he had thought. I shall not soon forget his look as he realized the position of affairs; he seemed as much astonished and displeased as a prince might be at receiving a rebuff from a courtier. His muddy, sallow complexion changed to an ugly brick-red; he became disconcerted, fidgeted, and appeared decidedly ill at ease, all the while regarding me with amazement and annoyance; and at last he departed in high dudgeon, taking his gentle sister with him. I flattered myself that now he would trouble me no more; and well satisfied with my morning's work, I went back to Charlie, who happened to inquire how I liked the Ashtons.

'I like what I have seen of Miss Ashton very much, but her brother is intolerable—so different from Sir Reginald! He was a gentleman; why isn't his son?'

Charlie burst out laughing. 'That is a joke! I wish Ashton could hear your remark; I'd like to see his face! Why he thinks himself a far finer gentleman than his father.'

'I dare say he does,' I answered impatiently, 'but that is no answer to my question.'

'Well, to put the whole matter in a nutshell, when Sir Reginald came into the property he found himself terribly hard up, and to right himself he married the only daughter of a wealthy money-lender—a very fine woman, but awfully vulgar. Ashton, unfortunately, takes after her.'

'But Miss Ashton is different?'

'Yes, Sir Reginald had the good luck to lose his wife after four or five years of anything but wedded

bliss, and shortly after he took to himself a second—this time a lady. Miss Ashton is her daughter.'

'I pity her for having such a brother,' I said emphatically; 'he is the most detestable man I have met. Do you know, he actually made a joke of the disgraceful way he behaved to me years ago, and had the impertinence to ask after my little dog.'

'My dear, you are not one bit like your usual self. Ashton has stirred up all the hidden gall in your disposition. You are too hard on him. I confess I don't admire his way with women, but taking him all round, he is a decent enough fellow. I should not choose him exactly as the guide for inexperienced youth, but don't blame him for my follies. I know you look upon him as my evil genius, a sort of Mephistopheles, and that gives you the animus you have against him.'

'Well, you told me yourself that half your gambling debts were owed to him, so for your sake I should never like him; and personally he is insufferable to me.'

Charlie was nettled at these remarks, but managed to keep his temper as he answered, 'It will be better for us not to discuss Ashton. I might as well attempt to move a mountain as any prejudice that has once got into your head. You cannot deny that, before you met him, you were prejudiced against him.'

'That is quite true; so we won't discuss him any more, and for your sake I will try to be civil to him.' Thus the matter dropped.

I found I had been premature in concluding that by my snubs I had rid myself of Sir Henry's attentions. Day after day he appeared at Westbrook Hall; and though I generally sent him away furious at my reception of his advances, yet some unfortunate glamour hung

about me, and again and again he returned to the attack. I became weary and dispirited, and sorrowfully concluded that the man must really be in love with me. Mere vanity and love of flirtation must have succumbed long ago to the chilling treatment it met with from me. I scarcely knew how to endure the sound of his voice, his ardent glances and long-drawn sighs, and I did my best to shun him ; but it would have proved a hopeless effort had not my new friend Colonel Mowbray, who was still at the Hall, and who had watched us silently for some little time, come to my relief. Again and again, when I was sorely pressed, the colonel would appear at my side and baffle the attempts of my tormentor to monopolize me. Sir Henry chafed at his interference, but could find no reasonable cause of offence in Colonel Mowbray's desire to share my society. Sanctuary was afforded me in Charlie's room, for visitors were as yet seldom admitted there ; but often when I least wished to leave him, he would send me away, declaring that I should be bored to death sitting so much with him.

An unexpected ally, however, materially improved the condition of affairs. Ever since the night of the dinner-party Alicia Spencer had been very sulky, and often rude to me. This made me uncomfortable, if not actually unhappy ; but when by constantly observing me she saw that I was doing my best to repel Sir Henry's advances, she ceased her sarcastic comments on all I did or said, and contented herself with watching me closely.

As a result of this, a new phase in her character presented itself to my notice. I had, with the unsparing sharpness of youthful criticism, set her down as haughty, unsympathetic, and occupied with herself entirely ; but I was now made aware that I had judged her too hastily.

One morning, to my great surprise, she invited me to walk with her in the garden. I readily agreed; and finding that she was not inclined to speak, I made some remark on the beauty and freshness of the day.

There was an inexpressible charm in the cool summer morning as we stood by the side of the far-reaching lawn, with its thousands of dewdrops flashing in the sunlight. The shrubs, bushes, and spiders' webs were all bathed in the same glad beauty, the air was deliciously fragrant and sweet, whilst the stillness was broken only by the twittering of birds and the faint sighing of the wind among the trees.

To my surprise Alicia responded brusquely: 'Oh, yes, the morning is right enough, but I did not bring you out here to discuss that; I have something to say to you, and what a tongue-tied simpleton I am! Confession is not much in my line, but I must and will get it over. Miss Westbrook, I have behaved shamefully to you. Will you forgive me? My excuse will sound little better than an insult: I thought you a hypocrite, and your simple, unconscious manner, which is so taking, as only put on—and that in reality you were as anxious for admiration as I am, only you angled for it in a different way. Now I have found out my mistake, I could not rest until I told you so, though I dare say that by this time you dislike me too much to care what I think.'

Was this girl, whose beautiful face glowed with a half-ashamed, half-expectant expression, the vain, selfish creature I had imagined? No! I had misjudged her quite as much as she had misjudged me, and I exclaimed eagerly, 'Indeed you are mistaken, I do care what you think of me. I have nothing to forgive; you misunder-

stood me, and that made you seem unkind. Now we will be friends.'

The warmth of my answer pleased her, and she said affectionately, 'Yes, we will be friends, you long-suffering dear! I have behaved to you horridly!' Then she bent her face to mine and kissed me fervently as she continued, 'I am going to speak frankly, but please don't be angry. From babyhood it was dinned into my ears that I was beautiful, and my looks never failed to secure me admirers till I met you. Since then I have been neglected, and have not liked it one bit. Forgive me when I say that you are not strikingly beautiful, nor is there anything extraordinary about your features or complexion; yet you have an expression of goodness. When you are excited your soul seems to shine out of your clear eyes, and you become more than pretty; I think the word *spirituelle* best describes you. Still, at your best I should never have feared you as a rival. But at this moment several men besides your two acknowledged admirers are wild after you, and I am heartily sick of hearing them rave about your grace and sweetness.'

I could not help colouring at these remarks, and Alicia, noticing it, cried penitently, 'Now I have gone too far! My long pent-up feelings have run away with me, and I have offended you.'

'No, I am not offended; don't think so. I can easily explain why people show me so much attention. I am, so to speak, the daughter of the house, and they do it on that account, as well as to please grandmother.' Then I faltered out, in a confused way: 'I don't like to say it, but she has let it be known that she means to give me a large portion if I marry to please her, and I have heard that that makes all the difference in a girl's

position. Before I came here I was never troubled with admirers.'

'You dear creature!' cried Alicia impulsively. 'So that is the explanation. How beautifully simple, to be sure! Well, I am beginning to discover the charm by which you work your magic spells, but it eludes imitation; it is inherent, and were I a man, I should join the general assembly and fall in love with you myself. Now, as we are friends, I want to tell you something. Sir Henry is getting desperate, and will soon make a mad plunge. My revered godmother has set her heart, too, on having him for a grandson. She has not much penetration, and fancies things are tending the way she wishes. To put it rather coarsely, she thinks you are holding back to draw him on.'

'Oh, how dreadful!' I gasped out, really distressed at this aspect of the affair.

'Well, I prophesy that when she is undeceived there will be a terrible upset; but I will do what I can for you. At any rate, if Colonel Mowbray is off duty, I will make a third when Sir Henry appears. Don't imagine I have been blind,' and she nodded knowingly; 'I, too, will try to earn your gratitude as our gallant friend has done, and perhaps you will learn to love me just a little.'

'I have begun already,' I answered impulsively; and from this time our friendship progressed rapidly.

Meanwhile most of grandmother's guests had left Westbrook Hall, but Colonel Mowbray stayed on by special invitation, and seemed remarkably happy in so doing. Alicia and he became quite cordial and friendly; he had very much disliked the way in which she had treated me, but now that this barrier was removed, the three of us roamed about the woods and

fields, played croquet, or sat with Charlie—whose health was improving rapidly—and conversed with all the ease and intimacy of real friends. I enjoyed these days thoroughly, for though there was the constant annoyance of Sir Henry's visits, yet with Alicia's assistance, as well as the colonel's, I was able to avoid being alone with him.

One day, however, I was nearly caught. We had all been sitting with Charlie and chatting for some time, when he challenged Alicia to a game of chess. Colonel Mowbray and I, tempted by the beauty of the day, wandered into the garden and found ourselves in a part of the grounds facing the west side of the Hall, which were laid out somewhat in the Italian style.

Three flights of steps led from terrace to terrace down to the garden below, where numerous walks ran, bordered with narrow box-edging. There also were to be seen stiff rows of hollies, yews, and other shrubs clipped and tortured into regular shapes, and at each turn or corner one came upon a statue or bust, completing a grotesque rather than beautiful picture.

We made our way to the end of this enclosure and sat down on a rustic bench under an arch in the yew-hedge which separated the garden from the park beyond. At the other end of this arch stood a little wooden gate leading into the park. Colonel Mowbray proposed that we should pass through it and rest under the shade of the trees. However, as the gate was locked, we remained a while where we were, for it was a very pleasant spot notwithstanding its artificiality. The flower-beds were a blaze of colour, and a fountain close by was playing gently, its water glistening as it rose and fell in the sunlight, and this brought to us a delicious sense of coolness.

Here, under the yew arch, we sat idly and contentedly for some time. At length we noticed a person descending the terrace steps and making his way in our direction. It was Sir Henry Ashton, of course.

‘There’s that fellow as usual turning up where he’s not wanted,’ muttered my companion.

‘I could never have found you out in this snug corner if a gardener had not luckily told me where you were,’ shouted Sir Henry as he drew near.

The colonel said something under his breath.

As Sir Henry shook hands with us I saw a half-concealed look of triumph in his eyes, the cause of which speedily disclosed itself, for turning to my volunteer guardian he said, ‘Mrs. Westbrook has entrusted me with a message for you, colonel. General Arden has called on important business—you will find him in the library; and to me is deputed the pleasant task of taking care of Miss Westbrook till you return.’ So saying, he seated himself in the most complacent manner by my side.

I rose hastily, and coldly remarked, ‘There is no need to trouble you; I must go and see how Charlie is getting on.’

‘Oh, you need not be anxious about your brother; I have just left him deep in a game of chess with Miss Spencer, and neither of them has a word to spare for any one.’

‘It is so hot,’ I replied, ‘I am going indoors.’

‘Colonel Mowbray evidently possesses the happy art of making sunshine seem cool to you, for I can testify,’ he remarked with a sneer, ‘that no change has taken place in the temperature during the last few seconds.’

Colonel Mowbray shot an indignant glance at my persecutor, and rising reluctantly from his seat paused

for a moment, evidently cudgelling his brains for some reasonable excuse to invite me into the house. The wished-for idea suddenly dawned, and he turned to me saying, in a tone of entreaty, 'Miss Westbrook, dare I ask a favour of you? Will you come and give my friend and myself a cup of tea before we plunge into business? I should like you to see General Arden; he is a fine specimen of the old school.'

'I will come with pleasure,' I replied fervently, the shyness produced by Sir Henry's last remark vanishing at this opportune invitation, and we started on our way to the house.

Sir Henry's face grew dark; he stepped up close to me and said, in low, insulting accents, 'It passes my comprehension what there is in Mowbray that infatuates you. Let me tell you, you are wasting your time: he means nothing by his attentions.'

I took not the slightest notice of this ungracious speech, but devoted myself to my kind friend, deigning neither look nor reply to Sir Henry's further observations. When we reached the top of the steps he whispered, 'I see you can't forgive me for spoiling your *tête-à-tête*, so I will say good-afternoon.'

Although Colonel Mowbray could not hear what Sir Henry had actually said, he had not failed to notice his impertinent manner, and broke out angrily, 'What an insufferable fellow! It amazes me that your grandmother can have him at the Hall constantly.'

It would no doubt have pleased Sir Henry could he but have known how wretchedly uncomfortable he had made me with his broad innuendoes about my liking for Colonel Mowbray. Though I knew well enough we were but good friends and nothing more, the construction which other people might put upon our

friendship now for the first time occurred to me. It may have been merely my excited fancy, but when I went into the library and was introduced to General Arden, it seemed to me that he manifested far more interest in me than was to be expected. After pouring out their tea I retreated to the grateful solitude of my own room, with flushed cheeks and in a thoroughly uncomfortable state of mind. One thought, however, gave me some comfort: surely, if Sir Henry believed I was in love with Colonel Mowbray, he would leave me alone and cease to annoy me with his hateful attentions. Alas! I was only allowed to nurse this consolation for a brief period, when an unlucky turn in a passing conversation revived his hopes and brought matters to a crisis. This conversation, memorable on that account alone, took place in my brother's sitting-room, which was a large square apartment, overdone in the decoration like all the other rooms.

'If you only knew,' said Charlie, in a burst of confidence, 'how I hate all this tawdry show! Why, it's just for all the world like a lady's boudoir! My smoking-den is the only place in this house I can tolerate, and I have warned grannie she must keep her fingers off that. Would you believe, she went and did up my suite of rooms, as she calls them, the last time I was away; and unfortunately she was so captivated with her handiwork that I had not the heart to spoil her pleasure.'

It was in this elegant boudoir that Sir Henry found us all sitting the next time he called. He entered with a bland smile, his rude manner and ill-temper of yesterday having quite disappeared, and he now did his best to be affable even to the offending colonel. After we had talked together for a few minutes, he

came towards me, and, leaning over the back of my chair, said in a low voice, inaudible to the others: 'I owe you an apology for the way I behaved yesterday; I made a great mistake. On reflection I feel sure that there is nothing but friendship between you and Colonel Mowbray, so that I made a thorough ass of myself for nothing.'

I could not endure the way in which he bent over me with his face quite close to mine, so I jumped up without answering and joined the others. Sir Henry, frowning again, took up a paper and tried to appear absorbed in the news.

The conversation interrupted by his entrance was resumed, and as he took no part in it, I soon became oblivious of his presence. So absolutely did I forget him that I moved away from the rest of the party and went to sit near the window to secure the best light for the work I was doing. Then our talk happened to turn upon the way in which a local gentleman of our acquaintance had treated a lady. We expressed our feelings freely and pretty strongly on the subject, I speaking even more warmly than the rest, and finishing up with the remark that I detested all flirts, male and female. Then I was startled to see Sir Henry gazing open-mouthed at me in a strangely conscious way. Suddenly he rose, and before Alicia or Colonel Mowbray could circumvent him he had seized a chair, placed it in front of me, and had sat down so as to separate me from the rest of the party. 'At last,' he exclaimed earnestly, 'I have discovered why you avoid me. What you said just now has opened my eyes. You are right in your accusations; I have flirted in the past, but never, I swear, with you!'

I interrupted him haughtily. 'Sir Henry you labour

under a mistake ; you were not in my thoughts at all when I was talking. It is not of the slightest consequence to me whether you flirt or not.'

He stared at me incredulously and replied, 'It is hardly possible to credit what you say, for you hit me off to the life !'

'If it were so, I can only assure you it was quite unintentional on my part ; you had no place in my thoughts. But I am not interested in this discussion, let us end it.'

'No, no!' he entreated in a half-whisper. 'It is a vital matter to me what you think of my character; and, whatever you may choose to say, I believe from what I have just heard that your determined coldness has arisen from the thought that I was trifling with you. I assure you it has never been so; from the first moment I saw you I felt you were different from any girl I had ever met. You are proud, but I like your pride; you would never throw yourself at a fellow's head. The truth is,' he added, turning his eyes full of passionate feeling upon mine, 'I'm in dead earnest, and no mistake !'

I could not help it—the hot blood rushed to my cheeks, my eyes fell before his glance, and this unfortunate shyness encouraged him to continue hoarsely, 'At last you are convinced of my sincerity ; you will hear me ?'

'No, never ! Do not ask it,' I retorted, in desperation. Rising hastily I attempted to pass him, but he would not allow me, repeating, even more emphatically than before : 'Remember ! I am in dead earnest, and to-morrow you shall have full proof of my devotion.'

At this moment Alicia came up to ask me some trifling question. I turned to her gladly, and Sir

Henry, without bidding farewell, abruptly quitted the room.

That night I went to bed with a heavy heart; I could plainly see that my unwelcome admirer would no longer be baffled, and his words rang in my ears incessantly, 'I'm in dead earnest, and no mistake!'

CHAPTER XIV

THE PAIN OF UNINTENTIONAL SUCCESS

MY fears were abundantly realized. Next day Sir Henry made his appearance quite early, and requested a private interview with my grandmother. During the time he remained closeted with her I sat with beating heart, expecting every instant to be summoned to her presence ; and when at last the bell rang my relief was intense, for a moment later I saw him riding slowly away down the long avenue.

Unfortunately I was rejoicing too soon ; my troubles were only just beginning. My unwelcome visitor had hardly passed out of sight when a servant came to tell me that his mistress wished to see me immediately.

I found my grandmother in a state of supreme satisfaction. She scarcely waited for the footman to close the door before she began : ' My dear Katherine, you are indeed a fortunate girl ! Sir Henry Ashton has just been here, and has asked my consent before formally addressing you. The union is one that I ardently desire, and you would be settled at a convenient distance from Charlie. Sir Henry is prepared to make exceedingly handsome settlements, and you may rest assured I shall take care that your marriage portion shall disgrace neither you nor myself.'

' Oh, grandmother ! ' I broke in excitedly, ' I can

never thank you enough for your generous intentions, but I could never marry Sir Henry ; I dislike him, and nothing on earth would induce me to become his wife !'

Mrs. Westbrook remained silent for a moment or two at this speech, and then said coldly, 'It is not usual, Katherine, for people in our position to talk about liking or disliking, nor do we decide hastily on matters of such importance. Family dignity and honour, not mere selfish preferences, have to be considered. *Noblesse oblige*, you know. I may, however, be judging you unfairly ; your refusal may not be the result of mere caprice. I have noticed'—and she fixed her eyes on my face searchingly—'the marked attention Colonel Mowbray pays you. He is reputed to be a non-marrying man, but he may have given you sufficient reason to think otherwise, and of course there is no doubt he is the better match of the two. He will be Lord Stourton when his uncle dies, and you would be a peeress of the realm ; but let us not make the grievous mistake of throwing away the substance for the shadow.'

Thus, with an air of conscious virtue, did my worldly and ambitious relative discuss these delicate matters. I was saved, however, the necessity of reply by the entrance of the very person whose prospects and intentions she had just been expatiating upon. I saw that Colonel Mowbray held in his hand a telegram ; but, not waiting to hear what he had to say, I instantly made my escape through the open French casement into the garden. There I wandered on and on, not caring where the winding paths led me, but wholly intent upon the disagreeable predicament in which I found myself. Suddenly I was aroused from these unpleasant thoughts by the voice of Colonel Mowbray

himself. 'I have been looking for you everywhere, Miss Westbrook, and am thankful to have found you at last. Pressing business calls me to town; scarcely an hour is left me, but I have something I must say to you before I go.'

'What a pity you have to leave us!' I said frankly and with fervour. 'Whatever shall we do without you? But perhaps you will return; I—I am sure I hope so.'

He fixed his eyes seriously on mine and answered gravely, 'My return depends entirely upon yourself, and the answer you may give to a question that concerns me very closely. Mrs. Westbrook asked me just now to plead Ashton's cause with you; I told her I would do nothing of the sort, I should have enough to do to plead my own. You do not understand me'—I was gazing blankly in his face—'let me speak more plainly; can you tolerate me as a husband? Will you condescend to be my wife? I do not ask for love; your friendship and companionship will amply satisfy me. I am very lonely; take pity on me and brighten my life!'

I was utterly stunned by this unexpected proposal, and could find neither voice nor words to reply. My grandmother's plain hints had not in the least prepared me for this offer. I esteemed and liked him as a friend, but anything beyond firm friendship between us had never crossed my mind.

It was not surprising perhaps that he took my silence as encouragement, and went on still more warmly: 'I thought I could never love again; but you, you dear innocent child, have won my heart entirely. Confide yourself to me, and while life lasts I will shield you to the utmost of my power from every care and sorrow.'

It was an astounding revelation to find that my kind friend had all at once changed into an ardent lover, and to realize that I should have to inflict pain and disappointment upon him. But it must be done. I faltered out, 'I am so grieved, so sorry, so very, very sorry! I never dreamt of this. I like and admire you ever so much, but not one bit in the way you desire.'

As I gazed at him through a mist of rising tears I saw in his face an expression of ardent devotion and yearning affection. In soft, pleading tones he replied: 'To be liked is all I ask; so much will satisfy me. I have one inducement certainly to offer you: I can lay rank and wealth at your feet. Unworldly as you are, and careless of position, I know that it is your delight to do good in the way of reducing the sum of the world's misery, and you will find in these things invaluable agents. You must not think,' he continued anxiously, 'that I shall prove an exacting husband; your will shall be mine.' Here, carried away by the strong current of his feelings, he seized my hands and pressed them tenderly in his own.

This action sealed his fate, for every fibre of my being rose in revolt, and a feeling of repulsion, which I could neither master nor disguise, swept over me, as with a shudder I almost rudely snatched my hands from his clasp.

He drew back a few paces, the light and love dying out of his face as he said bitterly, 'I am an old fool! How could I think it was possible for me to win a young girl's heart? My only excuse is that some remarks of Mrs. Westbrook's just now raised my despairing hopes to something like certainty of success. 'Surely,' he urged anxiously—'surely, you are not

thinking of marrying Sir Henry? I would far rather see you in your coffin !'

'Oh, no !' I exclaimed. 'You could not think that !'

'I have seen queer things in my life,' he returned, with a grim smile—'women short of angels giving themselves to fiends of men. Your sex, I know, has a passion for reforming us ; still, I don't think that charity stretched to its fullest extent could make you hopeful of remoulding Ashton. But enough of him ; I must say good-bye for many a long day.' Then, in sad tones : 'Good-bye, sweetheart, good-bye ! I have dared too much and lost all, and now I must school myself to forget.'

My own distress so filled my mind that his grief only served to annoy me. It was not for some time that I was able to feel any sympathy with his disappointment. As I had no love to give him, I felt no appreciation of the love he was so anxious to lavish on me. No, he desired too much ; and now that our happy, careless friendship had vanished, it was far better that we should part. He was noble and chivalrous, and in spite of my aversion to him in his new rôle of lover, the better part of my nature winced as he said frankly and generously, 'Miss Westbrook, I wish you to know that, in spite of your refusal, I am glad to have met you. Do not be too sorry that you cannot love me ; you never gave me the slightest encouragement. It was not your fault that you won my heart ; but, believe me, the world henceforth will be a better and brighter place to me since I know that at least one pure, true-hearted woman exists in it. One favour I will be bold enough to ask : Will you return with me to the house ? I should like your face to be the last recollection I may carry with me from this place.'

In silence we wended our way back, to find the dog-cart already at the door awaiting the colonel's arrival. Consulting his watch, he exclaimed, 'I must be off at once, or I shall miss my train; but first I must find your grandmother. Ah! there she is, coming to meet me.' He went forward hastily and said, 'I must thank you, dear Mrs. Westbrook, for all your kindness and hospitality.'

She interrupted him very graciously. 'It is hardly worth while to take so formal a farewell, as you will be back again almost immediately, I trust.'

'Dear madam, I am afraid not; I am leaving England at once for active service. This is really good-bye; and again let me thank you heartily for all the goodness you have shown a battered old soldier.'

Mrs. Westbrook's face turned white with suppressed anger, but she managed to restrain herself until he had driven off. Then, coming close up to me she spoke in a fierce whisper: 'Come with me this instant.' Saying which, she grasped my arm with the vigour and impetuosity of a much younger woman, and literally dragged me after her into one of the reception rooms. There, with flashing eye, she demanded the reason of Colonel Mowbray's departure. 'Surely, girl, you haven't refused him too?'

I was frightened, but my very fear nerved me to say bluntly, 'That is just what I have done.'

'Your reason? Your reason?' she screamed.

'I could not love him as a woman ought to love the man she marries.'

'Love! What madness! What has love to do with the matter when a coronet is in question? You talk like a milkmaid. No, a milkmaid would have more sense! You have taken leave of your senses! But

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I will write and inform Colonel Mowbray that you have reconsidered your refusal.'

'It will not be of the slightest use. Colonel Mowbray knows my feelings perfectly, and has accepted my refusal as final; besides, I have not the slightest intention of changing my mind.'

My words and my calm manner enraged her to the last degree. She heaped every disgraceful epithet she could think of on my grandfather and myself, and ordered me to leave the house at once.

It was dreadful to see her white head shaking with ungovernable rage, and her sunken eyes blazing with passion. Involuntarily, when I found myself outside the door, I rubbed my eyes as in an attempt to wipe away this terrible scene. Then, trembling and unnerved, I made my way to my room and sat down to collect my scattered thoughts.

After a few minutes I recovered enough to remember that the carriage was already ordered, and that I had no time to lose; so, ringing for my grandmother's maid, I placed in her charge all the dresses and jewellery her mistress had bestowed upon me. Poor woman! She was much distressed, and even shed tears over my departure.

In the midst of my preparation Charlie's gaunt figure suddenly appeared in the doorway, and I was positively scared at the ugly expression on his countenance—it reproduced so painfully that other which I had seen not a quarter of an hour before.

'What is this I hear about your leaving Westbrook Hall?' he asked, in suppressed irritation.

'Oh, Charlie, don't look so dreadful! I have annoyed grandmother, and she wishes me to go home. You know I have already stayed a tremendous time.'

'Then it is true!' he almost shouted, no longer able to control himself; 'she has dared to turn you out of the house! But you shall not go alone!'

As he turned towards the staircase I rushed after him, held him fast, and inquired fearfully, 'What are you going to do?'

'I am going straight to grandmother to tell her I leave the house at the same time as my sister,' he answered sternly.

I had no time to pick and choose my words; I felt I must say something effective, so I blurted out, 'Charlie, you can't quarrel with her now. You have just taken all that money for your debts.'

He shivered all over as he retorted grimly, 'You do well to remind me that I am her purchased slave! So now, I suppose, she may insult my sister with impunity?' Then, changing his tone abruptly: 'What has made her act in this mad fashion?'

'She is vexed because both Sir Henry and Colonel Mowbray want to marry me, and I will not have either of them.'

'Whew!' ejaculated my brother slowly, his anger suddenly evaporating. 'So that's what the row is about!'

He walked to the couch, flung himself on it, exhausted by his outburst, and after a few moments remarked, 'Well, young lady, I must say you have made good use of your time to bag two such birds as these! You were right enough to refuse Ashton; but Colonel Mowbray is one of the finest fellows going. I think you might at least have done me the honour of hearing what I had to say.' Once again his anger rose, this time directed against myself.

Charlie's evident vexation was the last straw added

to my burden of misery. I broke down and cried bitterly ; whereupon he jumped up, and drawing me beside him on the couch, tried to comfort me, the while he stroked my hair, and said, ' There, there ! I will say no more about it. Do as you like ; I know you have had quite enough to bear.'

' Yes, grandmother was dreadful ! And now that you are cross too, it is too much for me !' I sobbed.

' My dear child, I don't wonder the old lady cut up rough at your throwing away such chances. Fancy this innocent face doing such mischief ! How did you manage it ?'

' I don't know ; I think Colonel Mowbray imagined himself in love with me because I reminded him of that poor girl he was once to have married. As for Sir Henry, it is incomprehensible, because I always avoided him from the first, and he knew it too.'

' Your reasons sound plausible enough ; still I can't quite accept them. Perhaps, on the whole, it is well for your own comfort to go home at once, and get out of grannie's way. I confess I have some sympathy with her myself ; you might have been Lady Stourton ! However, I'll say no more ; I don't see that I need scold you for not wanting to run away from me.'

When it came to good-bye, I nearly broke down again, and Charlie had the greatest difficulty in keeping calm. It was hard for me to leave him while he looked so ill, but I consoled myself with the thought that for his sake I was better away, as his anger against grandmother only smouldered, and there was little doubt that the slightest provocation would fan it into a flame. I had no wish to involve him in my quarrel.

As I passed through the hall on my way to the

carriage, Alicia ran to meet me, and exclaimed excitedly, 'My dear Kate! I have only heard this moment from your grandmother that she has ordered you to leave Westbrook Hall. What an awful shame it is! And the old lady is still in such a passion that I am too great a coward to confront her with even a glance of disapproval. You may despise me, but it's the truth. How could you find it in your heart to refuse the colonel! I only wish he had given me the chance instead! Wouldn't I have jumped at being Lady Stourton? But come'—and she took me by the arm—'every minute that you stay here you are in danger of another avalanche of abuse, and I am risking it by my chatter.' As she hurried me to the carriage she whispered affectionately, 'I will come and see you very soon, and bring you news of your brother. Good-bye, you dear, ill-treated creature!' Each word was accompanied with a warm kiss.

I was very grateful for Alicia's sympathy; my heart was sore at leaving the house that contained my dear brother, and as the carriage bore me swiftly away I burst once more into tears, which flowed all the faster at the recollection of the sorrow and disappointment I had inflicted on my friend the colonel, who had shown me such uniform courtesy and kindness.

It was all very sad; still, I could not blame myself. His offer was totally unexpected, for I had fully believed that his affections lay buried with the lovely girl of whom he had talked to me, who should have been his bride. As I sat in the carriage, miserable and disconsolate, I wished over and over again that I could have cared for him. How supremely happy we should all have been at that moment! Charlie would have been delighted, and my poor, worldly old

grandmother would have been in a seventh heaven of bliss.

It was passing strange that rank, wealth, and honour had been laid at my feet, only to be rejected. Somehow my mind would keep reverting to my last suitor's attractive qualities. How brave, handsome, generous and religious he was! Yet I, an insignificant girl, without beauty or rank, had refused this paragon; and, what was more, I knew that I should refuse him again, were he sitting behind me and urging his suit. At the thought of Colonel Mowbray's proximity as a lover I shuddered, and instinct told me his case was absolutely hopeless. I tried to determine the reason of such unaccountable conduct. Was it because I had once lightly parted with my heart to an unworthy stranger who, after winning it easily, had flung it contemptuously aside? If so, it was indeed a hard fate that a man like Mr. Arnold should appear on the scene of my life for scarcely more than three weeks, to spoil it for ever. Then unconsciously I sank into a reverie of the past; and as I recalled the masculine character of that evil genius of my life, I arrived at the conclusion, from which I never afterwards wavered, that in this particular case, at least, he had done me no wrong; for, granted that he was the kind of man who could win my affections, Colonel Mowbray certainly never could. I laughed aloud at the incongruity of Mr. Arnold's ever proposing to become my willing slave. The two men indeed represented opposite poles of character. There was a strain of weakness about Colonel Mowbray somewhere, in spite of all his chivalry and courage, that must have proved a fatal barrier to his winning my affections. I had never possessed the slightest sympathy with a wife's ambition to be the oak in the

married state, the husband acting the humble part of the ivy ; for me it must be the reverse, or marriage would be an utter impossibility.

Then I took to wondering sadly what charm these two men had found in me, when I lacked attraction for the one man whose love I would have treasured. Life was indeed a mystery !

These reflections by no means shortened the long drive, and I was thoroughly weary in body and mind when I reached home.

A crumb of comfort, however, was in store for me. Miss Gregg, though much surprised to see me, since in my last letter I had never even hinted that I might be leaving Westbrook Hall, welcomed me affectionately, and cheered me by the sympathy she expressed while I poured forth the history of my summary ejection.

CHAPTER XV

THE TORTUOUS WAYS OF LOVE

ALICIA, true to her promise, frequently rode over to let me know how Charlie was progressing, and greatly lessened my anxiety by reporting a marked improvement each time in his health and spirits. On her last call she cheered me by the news that he hoped very shortly to pay me a visit. As she rose to leave she remarked, 'Your brother and I have often talked about you; he tells me you never go to balls or theatres, and that you spend your time visiting the sick and poor. That would be a dreadful bore to me; do you really like it?'

I replied honestly that I enjoyed such work, and that it cost me no self-denial.

After a moment's silence Alicia rejoined, 'You have a queer taste, no mistake! What a shame to throw away your splendid voice in this pokey place, where not a soul can appreciate it!'

I smiled, for I had found that poor folks enjoy music as well as their richer neighbours, and my gift of song had proved an 'Open Sesame' to many a door that would otherwise have remained closed against me. The recollection of some of my experiences must have brightened up my face, for my companion remarked, 'You look really happy! Your brother says you are religious; is that the reason?'

‘Yes,’ I answered unhesitatingly, and without any shame.

‘I don’t know much about religion myself; tell me what it does for you.’

Thus invited, I told her, though very feebly and lamely considering the abundant glory of the theme, something of the deep and constant satisfaction which I found in the religion of the Lord Christ.

‘Well!’ she exclaimed, as I concluded. ‘What you say sounds like a fairy tale, and when I’m sick of the world I’ll try religion too.’

‘Why wait?’ I asked quietly.

Shaking her head, with a smile she replied, ‘You’ve had your innings, child, and done your best to enlighten a poor heathen. Enough is as good as a feast, however, and I really can’t bear more of this talk to-day. I must wish you good-bye, a real good-bye, for I am going home to-morrow.’ Then, embracing me affectionately, she bade me farewell.

A few days after Alicia returned home Charlie and I once more met, and I was not surprised to find that she had made a deep impression on him.

Scarcely had he replied to my anxious inquiries regarding his health before he began: ‘You have no idea how good Alicia has been to me since you were bundled off! She has simply devoted herself to making me comfortable; and when I say she is as good as she is beautiful, why, I’ve only given her her due. She’s awfully gone on you—a fact that no doubt went far with me—and we talked about you to such an extent—— But I will spare your blushes.’

‘Don’t be such a goose, Charlie; tell me, does Alicia know how much you care for her?’

‘I guess she must; I’m awfully hard hit! I only

wish I was more worthy of her. I can tell you it took me all my time not to let out what I felt, but it would have been mean, after she had been so tremendously good to me, to take advantage of it ; so I made up my mind to wait till after next term. We have both had invitations to the same house, and then she will be able to have me or not as she chooses.'

At this point I interrupted decidedly : 'I'm sure she won't refuse you ; I have not the slightest doubt that she likes you already.'

'Do you really believe so?' he queried eagerly. 'What reason have you for thinking so?'

Thus urged, I gave my reasons, and listened in return to all the rhapsodies of a lover. But in the midst of dilating on Alicia's perfections, he broke off abruptly : 'By the by, Kate, I wanted particularly to tell you something ; but this subject puts everything else out of my head. Do you know, you have had a very near shave of getting me back on your hands? Grannie and I had a tremendous row, and I almost threw the whole thing up, though it might mean resigning whatever hope there was of winning Alicia. It happened in this way. Grannie saw in the paper the other morning that Colonel Mowbray had sailed for India, and it put her once again in an awful state of mind. All day she was barely civil to me, for she has never quite forgiven me for siding with you in that matter. However, we managed to get along till after dinner, when an incautious remark escaped me. Thereupon she worked herself into a perfect frenzy, and spoke of you in such a fashion that flesh and blood could stand it no longer. I gave her pretty forcibly to understand that either she must retract her slanderous statements about you, or I should leave the house there and then ; I would not

pass another night under a roof where my sister's character was so cruelly aspersed. To my surprise she seemed scared at the idea of my leaving Westbrook Hall. Her mood changed suddenly, and calming down she said, "I withdraw my insinuations ; but surely you will admit that your sister behaved ungratefully and disrespectfully to me."

"No," I replied, still unpacified, "I will admit nothing of the kind ; my sister owes you neither gratitude nor respect." Even this speech failed to annoy her, and she agreed that possibly I might be right. At any rate she ceased her tirades against you, and hoped that I would let bygones be bygones and think no more of the matter. I consented, the subject dropped, and it has not been raised again. But I can't shake off the impression her words gave me ; and though I owe her a great deal, I cannot help feeling indignant when I remember that even the servants know you were turned out of doors.'

I was grieved to hear of this quarrel, and tried to soothe Charlie's irritated feelings by reminding him of grandmother's age, her loneliness and dependence on his affection.

With my brother in such a mood, I thought it wise to keep to myself a trifling annoyance of my own, which I might otherwise have confided to him. The day after I returned to Charnham all the dresses and presents that I had purposely left behind had been sent to me, accompanied by this curt note : 'Mrs. Westbrook begs to forward to Miss Leigh the articles of attire and jewellery she neglected to take with her from Westbrook Hall.' I would far rather have been without gifts bestowed in such a spirit, and in his present mood Charlie might have urged me to return them, which would have resulted only in a further straining of relationships.

One source of satisfaction undoubtedly remained to me from the unfortunate visit I had paid: it severed for ever the intimacy between Sir Henry and my brother. The former had declared that he would not consider his suit rejected until he heard it from my own lips, so that I thought it best to see him. When he came I spoke with great plainness, and made my rejection as final as words and manner could convey it, hoping thus to put an end to the matter—but in vain. He declared that he could not live without me, and that he would not give up the hope of winning me eventually.

In this spirit he renewed his offer a week later; but when I remained obdurate to all his passionate entreaties, and signified my intention of never seeing him again, he gave way to such a fit of rage, and used such violent language, that in alarm I made my escape from the room. On his departure I gave strict orders that on no pretext whatever was he to be again admitted. The very next day, however, in spite of all objections from the servants, he forced his way yet again into my presence. Dr. Brown, who fortunately for me was in the room, indignantly informed my persecutor that if he did not withdraw at once he would call the police. This threat had the desired effect, and he slunk away sullenly.

Our old friend felt it his duty to acquaint Charlie with the ungentlemanly treatment to which I had been subjected, and my brother in consequence wrote Sir Henry a furious letter, which mortally offended him. Thus, unintentionally, though by a most unpleasant process, I became the instrument of severing Charlie's connexion with this dangerous companion.

Back again at Cambridge, my brother firmly adhered

to the good resolutions he had formed during his illness, and dropped his former wild associates. In his third year, to the astonishment of the dons, and to my proud satisfaction, he had gained the reputation of a serious reading man.

But once again a serious quarrel arose between him and Mrs. Westbrook, of which I was the unwilling cause. In the middle of the term she wrote him an affectionate letter telling him of all the gaieties she was planning to celebrate his coming of age. He wrote back at once, refusing to take part in arrangements which would set all tongues in the country wagging over the absence of his sister on such an occasion.

Mrs. Westbrook intimated her willingness to invite me, but he only replied that he would never be the means of subjecting his sister to the risk of being turned out of doors a second time.irate as she was at his decision, Mrs. Westbrook submitted, and on his return the festivities were strictly confined to the servants and tenants on the estate.

Fortunately another event had occurred to help to make matters pleasanter when they met again, for Charlie had by that time become engaged to her god-daughter Alicia, and this afforded her the liveliest satisfaction. The visit of which he had spoken to me had resulted in an understanding which approved itself to all concerned, and rendered it probable that, for once at least, the course of true love would run smooth.

The news of my brother's engagement speedily became public property, and I received a letter from Miss Nicholson offering their best wishes for the young people's happiness, and closing with the urgent entreaty that I would pay my long-promised, long-deferred visit. Happily I was free to accept her kind invitation,

and it was with a rare delight I set off on my journey northwards.

Our meeting was quite as joyful as I had anticipated. Christine was in high spirits, and lovely as ever. George Munro, too, was on the platform at Waring Green to greet me, having come over early from Corrington, as he informed me, on purpose to join with the others in giving me a hearty welcome to their part of the world.

I noticed a marked improvement in his manner and appearance. The shyness and awkwardness which had formerly characterized him had totally disappeared; he was still blunt and brusque occasionally, but he had acquired that air which bespeaks the prosperous man accustomed to exercise authority. In one thing he remained unchanged—his admiration for Christine. He paid her marked attention, which I was delighted to see her accept as natural; and I concluded that matters were tending towards the goal he ardently desired.

Great, therefore, was my disappointment one afternoon when Miss Nicholson informed me that her niece did not regard him in the light of a lover, and that her intention was to lead a single life and devote herself to art. This set me wondering why she behaved towards Munro in the way she did. During his frequent visits she monopolized him, consulted him about her painting, accepted his presents, and repaid them by a variety of little gifts which the feminine mind would generally construe as tokens of reciprocated affection. Whenever he was expected it was Christine who saw that his room was carefully prepared and that his favourite dishes were ordered; and as the hour arrived at which he generally made his appearance

she would gradually gravitate towards the window, and the moment he appeared would hasten to welcome him.

I felt that this behaviour was very hard on George if it meant no more than Miss Nicholson had told me. One day I remonstrated with Christine on her conduct, but she replied, in an off-hand way : ' My dear Kate, don't trouble your head about George and myself. He knows I regard him as a brother, and that I merely show him sisterly affection.'

In this assumed relationship she showered on him, according to her changing moods, honeyed words and beaming glances, which raised him to a giddy height of happiness ; then, just as recklessly, she would let fall some cutting remark that dashed his spirit terribly. Consequently I grew more and more distressed, for I felt that if she were not conscious of the torture she was inflicting she ought to be made to realize it. The Nicholsons sat blandly by, not seeing that the tension George endured grew more severe every day, and I felt no surprise when one afternoon he confessed to me that he had serious thoughts of leaving England and taking up his abode in New York, where he would be quite as useful to his uncle as on this side of the Atlantic. With a groan he concluded, ' Any change must prove a relief ; I can't be more miserable than I am here !'

His hopeless tone went to my heart ; yet, strange to say, it annoyed me too, for his manner of wooing had never pleased me. My feelings getting the better of me, I replied, ' I quite agree with you, it would be as well to leave England ; you will certainly never win Christine in the way you set about it. A woman rarely learns to love a man who makes himself her abject slave.'

The blood rushed to his face at my words, and for a moment or two he was too angry to speak. After a while he replied sullenly, 'I am a fool! I know it as well as yourself, perhaps better. You are right to taunt me with my folly, but unfortunately it has become the habit of my life to strive to serve and please her. No doubt she despises me as you do, but from this moment I will deserve her respect, if not her love. Anyway, I'll act like a man.'

From that moment, to my dismay, he did indeed act like a man, for he went headlong to the opposite extreme. He spoke but little to Christine, seldom looked at her, and never sat by her side, transferring his attentions to me. So, for the first time in her life, she found herself totally neglected by him.

Neither her surprise nor her pleading glances seemed to take effect; evidently the words I had uttered had entered like iron into his soul. But he could not summon up sufficient resolution to keep away from his enchantress, though determined to treat with her on other terms.

I devoutly wished that I had held my tongue and not meddled in the love affairs of others; yet I could not help noticing with some satisfaction that under this new aspect of affairs Christine's spirit changed. She became moody and silent, especially after George's visits, and I hoped with all my heart she was finding out that she was not quite so indifferent to him as she believed herself to be.

For my own part I disliked the situation in which George's persistent attentions had placed me. Mr. and Miss Nicholson, though by no means keen observers, could not be blind to the extraordinary interest he manifested in me. Naturally, the good old souls

imagined that he had fallen desperately in love with me ; and though I had not the slightest wish to deceive them, I knew not how to act. My cavalier was not unaware of the effect on their minds. But Christine was the one person in all the world to him, and he never gave a thought to the impression he might be creating in the minds of lookers-on.

The only thing that reconciled me to this uncomfortable state of affairs was the conviction that jealousy was proving the best ally to George's cause. Christine became very irritable, and one night spoke quite sharply to us after George and I had been practising duets together for more than an hour. It had been a usual thing for her to accompany me upstairs and have a chat ere we said good-night, but of late she had excused herself on the plea that she was too tired and would rather go straight to bed. On this particular evening she followed me into my room, closed the door, sat down, and remained silent and preoccupied for several minutes. At last she said, with an effort, ' I wonder whether you are aware, Kate, that the whole neighbourhood is talking of the marked way in which George devotes himself to you ? Some people were expressing to me this very afternoon their pleasure at your engagement. As we are such old friends, why should we keep secrets ? I must follow the example of these good folk and offer my congratulations on your having gained such a lover. He is really worthy of you ; he will make you happy ; and I am glad that my two dearest friends——' Here she stopped, the tears that rose to her eyes being anything but signs of joy, as I was well aware.

I answered coolly, ' Your congratulations are slightly premature. George has not made me an offer, and if

he does I shall not accept him. Much as I respect him, I feel for him nothing more than the affection of a sister.'

This last sentence, added maliciously to recall to her what she had declared herself, was entirely thrown away. Without noticing it she burst out angrily, 'How, then, can you trifle so cruelly with him? You are treating him shamefully! He may not be handsome and fascinating, yet for real sterling worth and manliness I don't know his equal.'

'Well,' I rejoined, 'you do astonish me! You talk of my playing with his affections. Pray ask yourself how you have treated him all these years. Suppose he does want to marry me now—which I don't believe—you know that it is only because you offer him no encouragement. Come, I will make a bargain with you that his feelings may be no longer lacerated. If he makes me an offer I will accept him on the condition that you will promise to do the same should he make an offer to you.'

Christine gazed at me in speechless astonishment; then after a prolonged silence she replied, 'What do you mean? I am safe, however, in giving you the promise; for, whatever he may have been in the past, he certainly now has neither eyes nor ears for any one but you.'

'Very well,' I rejoined, 'it is a bargain; and, remember, it is to hold good under all circumstances.'

She blushed slightly as she observed, 'Yes, I will remember; but there is not much fear I shall be called upon to fulfil it.' And with a warmer kiss than she had given me for many days she departed. I was left to wonder how it would all end, though I did not feel very uncomfortable about the promise I had given.

The next day I found that I had not spoken a

moment too soon, for my supposed admirer came to tell me that he had made arrangements to sail in a week for New York.

‘Oh, George,’ I ejaculated, ‘go at once to Christine! Tell her your plans, and the reason why you are leaving England, and then ask her plainly if she wishes you to go.’

He looked at me sadly and replied, ‘It is no use, Kate; my case is perfectly hopeless. Still, I will try.’ And he went on his errand, feeling sure that the interview would end in a sad farewell.

I knew otherwise, yet I waited impatiently for Christine to come and announce that the promise had been fulfilled. At last she made her appearance and said, in a half-ashamed fashion, ‘Kate, after all the bargain has fallen to me to fulfil; I have just promised to marry George. He says he is satisfied with the affection I can give him. I hope I am doing right; though I am not what people call ‘in love’ with him, yet I do care for him dearly, I am certain. You cannot tell how desolate I felt when I thought he had ceased to love me. However, the matter is settled now, and he has given up all idea of leaving England.’

They were a very sober pair of lovers. At first George Munro could hardly believe in his good fortune; and as for Christine, I wondered whether her doubts or her love would prevail. But as the days passed and George’s love had opportunity to win its way, her sense of satisfaction seemed to increase, and I ceased to worry about the consequences.

There was no reason why the engagement should be a long one. George had been taken into partnership by his uncle, a wealthy shipowner, so the wedding was arranged to take place within three months; and I

returned to see the consummation of my first and last attempt at match-making. When, a short time after, the proud young husband brought his beautiful bride to visit his relations in Charnham, she seemed so bright and contented that my last doubt as to the wisdom of the serious step she had taken vanished, and I felt sure she had been wise in accepting George's devotion.

But to return to the other lovers, Charlie and Alicia. When one engagement, entered into with so many tremors, had terminated favourably, what might not have been expected from the betrothal of these two who appeared so fondly attached to each other! Sad to say, however, the very week that saw the one pair united witnessed the separation of the other couple who had started with so much promise.

Long before the engagement was broken off, I had discovered that Charlie was not happy, both from the tone of his letters, which plainly showed that he was out of spirits, and from his weary and harassed looks when we met. He did not take me into his confidence; I could only surmise that things were not going on well between Alicia and himself, until one day he told me that the engagement was broken,

'You must not on any account lay the blame entirely on Alicia,' he said. 'No doubt I have been unreasonably jealous and exacting. For a time we got on all right because she was satisfied with me alone; then she deigned to smile on some of those who constantly hung about her. I let her know that I considered she ought to reserve her charms for me, which she did not like. Soon she went a little too far, calling it just harmless fun; but I grew jealous, and we quarrelled periodically. At first we regularly made up our differences, till, for very perverseness' sake, she showed special favour to-

wards a man whom she knew I detested. Nothing I could urge had any effect, so this time we have parted. Still, I think, on looking back, that once she really cared for me, and I grieve that a fine nature like hers should have been spoiled by bad training and by the heartless set about her. Now I must do my best to forget her.'

I was Charlie's sister, naturally prejudiced in his favour, and though fear of grieving him kept me from expressing my opinion of Alicia's conduct, still, in my heart of hearts, I was angry at the way she had treated him. I knew how devotedly he had loved her, and was certain that he must have borne a great deal before he broke with her entirely.

Thus unhappily ended an engagement which had commenced under such fair auspices.

CHAPTER XVI

MY SECOND CALL TO WESTBROOK

FROM his boyhood Charlie had borne physical suffering bravely and patiently, and he endured just as unflinchingly the mental pain which now fell to his lot. No one who knew him could have failed to discover that he suffered acutely ; he looked inexpressibly weary, as if he scarcely slept ; his face sharpened, dark hollows formed under his eyes, and a strange expression settled about the corners of his mouth which made him look ten years older.

I longed to give expression to my sympathy, but instinct told me that silence would be more helpful to him than speech, and I was thankful when the time came for him to go back to college, where study and change of scene would divert his thoughts into other channels. My feelings did not mislead me, for his letters turned more and more from himself to his studies. Hard work was proving to be his salvation, and when he returned after taking his degree I was delighted with his appearance.

He had been at home barely a month when I received another hasty summons to Westbrook Hall. This time its mistress was seriously ill : it seemed fated that my presence there should be occasioned only by the sickness of one or other of its inmates.

As the carriage drove in at the great gates I noticed a number of people standing together and talking eagerly. They turned to gaze at me with such looks of compassionate interest as to make me fear that grandmother must be worse even than I had imagined from Charlie's note; and when the old butler met me I inquired anxiously, 'Is your mistress's life in danger, Barnes?'

'Yes, miss, I'm sadly afraid it is. But there's more than that. It's a sad day for us all. Master would prefer, though, to tell you himself'; and the old man left me in the library with my heart beating violently.

In a minute or two Charlie entered with so pale and sorrowful a countenance that I exclaimed, 'Tell me the worst! Is grandmother dying?'

'No, not dying,' he said, 'but she is very bad. This illness is caused by the terrible news that she has lost every penny she possessed, and it has affected her mind as well as her body.'

'Lost every penny!' I repeated; 'how can that be? I thought she was one of the partners in the great banking house of Langton & Pendlebury.'

'Yes, more's the pity. Read this.' And taking up a newspaper from the table he pointed to a paragraph headed, 'Tremendous Failure of a London Bank; Disgraceful Disclosures!'

I read the paragraph, and found the bank had had to close its doors, the leading partner, Pendlebury, having absconded with everything he could lay his hands on.

'Poor grandmother!' I ejaculated; 'this is dreadful!'

'Yes, indeed,' responded Charlie, 'it is grievous for her. But come and see her.'

I hesitated at the idea of going unannounced into her presence, but my brother said quickly, 'You won't

disturb her ; I only wish you could. She will not notice you. Since the news reached her she has never moved from her seat ; she has taken no food, and remains apparently unconscious of all that passes around her. At first she kept repeating, in a hoarse, unnatural voice that made my flesh creep, "A pauper ! I'm a pauper ! The boy is ruined !" but after a time she sank into silence, which continues still.'

We entered her favourite room, and, as Charlie had predicted, she noticed neither of us. There she sat, in a large arm-chair, with her wide-open eyes set in a vacant stare that made me fear her reason had fled beyond recovery. The doctor and the maid stood by her, and the former, shaking my hand, remarked sympathetically, 'The dear old lady is in a most critical condition. I have telegraphed to two specialists, for it is a case in which I fear to act alone ; so we must await their coming.'

When the physicians arrived they advised that the patient should be left alone, without any attempt at moving her. To nature must be given the chance of righting matters. Before they left an attempt was made to pass some liquid into her mouth, but as the result was a spasm that distorted her face, the attempt was not persisted in.

It was Friday evening when Mrs. Westbrook was taken ill, and Sunday found her in the same pitiable condition—blind and deaf to all that was going on. But on that fair Sabbath morning, just as the church bells began to ring out their call to worship, the sweet sounds seemed to penetrate those ears which had remained closed to all else. She started, the vacant look left her eyes, speech returned, and she said, in a natural, though weak and tremulous voice, to the maid at her side,

‘Mary, I must have been asleep ; the bells are ringing. Fetch my bonnet and cloak ; I must get ready for church at once.’

At a look from the doctor Mary obeyed. The things having been fetched and put on, Mrs. Westbrook sat perfectly still till the single bell announced to the village people that service would commence in five minutes ; then, turning to her maid, she said sharply, ‘Find Mr. Westbrook, and tell him I am waiting for him.’

‘I’m here, grannie,’ said Charlie, coming forward.

The poor old lady rose from her chair with great difficulty, put her trembling hand through Charlie’s arm, walked a step or two ; then, staggering, she fell into his arms and cried, ‘What is the matter with me ? I feel so faint, so very ill, I cannot go to church,’ and with that she closed her eyes.

The doctor administered a stimulant, and under its influence she revived somewhat. Unfortunately, however, memory returned ; she gave a cry like a wounded animal and exclaimed, in a stringent voice, ‘Ah ! now I remember. Oh, that dreadful letter ! To think that I should live to be a pauper and see my boy beggared ! Carry me upstairs and lay me on my bed ; my heart is broken !’

My brother carried her to her room and laid her on the bed from which she was destined never to rise. We watched her together as day by day she grew weaker. Her mind would often wander from extreme exhaustion, and she would talk ramblingly of childish days and of people whose names we had never heard. Occasionally her mind would clear ; then her eyes never rested on Charlie without a smile to lighten up her wan, death-stricken face.

She took little notice of me ; but sometimes, when she was more than usually restless or in bitterness of spirit through reflecting on her penniless condition, she would let me sing to her, and I would try to soothe her to sleep by a familiar hymn. One evening, after I had sung—

Just as I am, without one plea,
But that Thy blood was shed for me,
And that Thou bidd'st me come to Thee,
O Lamb of God, I come,

she stopped me, and, turning to Charlie, she said slowly and feebly, 'My boy, I shall soon be in the other world but I don't feel myself ready to go. What do those words mean which Katherine has just sung? "Thy blood was shed for me." Can you interpret them?'

It was with a strange, sudden delight, so keen as to be almost painful, that I heard him reply : 'Yes, grannie, I know quite well ; but I have not known it long.' And while I sat by, weeping joyful tears, he explained in the simplest language to the poor stricken woman the message of the old, old story.

As he ceased speaking, grannie repeated, 'Thy blood was shed for me. What a wonderful love ! How strange it is I never thought of it before ! Oh, it is good news that nothing needs to be done ! I am too old, too ill ; but I can trust. The Son of God won't mind my being a pauper !' In a half-articulate whisper she murmured words the sense of which we could not catch ; then she sank again into the semi-conscious state in which she generally lay.

Charlie crossed softly over to where I sat, overwhelmed with joy at the change in my brother's life, and, taking my hand, he whispered, 'Katie, I have wanted to tell

you this so much, but words have always failed me. You know how I yearned after the faith of my childhood when I was ill, yet the very fact of wanting it so badly made me dread that I might rest in a belief which was not genuine. How terribly I suffered! At times I believed everything, at times I doubted everything. Backwards and forwards I oscillated, till I feared my brain would give way under the strain. For a time Alicia distracted me from these agonizing thoughts, but when I lost her I craved more than ever for the consciousness of One Omnipotent and Merciful, on whom I could rest my burden. I remember pacing my room half-distractedly one night and crying out, "O God, show Thyself to me; dispel this darkness, and scatter these doubts. I am feeling after Thee, let me find Thee now!" Before I had finished speaking my prayer was answered; a sudden conviction of God's presence seized me then and there; His peace took possession of me, and from that night I have never doubted but that He has accepted me. And you know life has put on a new colouring since then; it is filled with new interests. I could even imagine that earth is a part of heaven itself—or at least its threshold.'

Certainly, if Charlie stood on the threshold of heaven, I was with him there! My cup of gladness was full, as we sat side by side talking through the long quiet hours of the night in that room overshadowed by the Angel of Death. We became more at one in heart than we had been even in the days of our happy childhood.

But to return to the invalid. Several times she spoke on religious subjects, not only to Charlie but also to the clergyman of the parish, and to Dr. Brown, who visited her frequently. She was really changed, and one proof she gave of her sincerity amazed us much.

A day or two before the end she beckoned Charlie and myself to her bedside, and said, in feeble, halting tones, 'I want you to know, children, that I entirely forgive your grandfather, Dr. Leigh. He treated me shamefully and spoiled my life, yet I have been so much forgiven, I can only forgive unreservedly. It has been a hard struggle, and it has made it all the harder to know that my own dear boy will owe all he has in the world to him and not to me. I had planned quite differently, but the will of the Lord be done!'

Charlie and I listened in silence. It would have been cruel to have attempted a defence of grandfather's conduct; moreover, we knew right well that the noble soul she so grievously misunderstood would have been the first to rejoice that at last she had cast out of her heart those vindictive feelings which she had cherished so long.

Soon after this she sank into a state of torpor and gently passed away; and on a chill, rainy autumn morning we laid her to rest among the falling leaves in the little churchyard hard by the Hall. At her own request—for the knowledge of her penniless condition oppressed her sorely—the funeral arrangements were as simple as possible. Let it be said to their honour that all the principal county families came unbidden to pay the last respects to their old friend.

In spite of the grave faults of her character it was only natural that Charlie should feel her loss keenly. She had loved him devotedly and unselfishly, and had studied to please him in every way; but even he was thankful, for her own sake, that her life ended when it did. It was only on sufferance that she had been allowed to end her days at Westbrook Hall, and that indulgence had been purchased by Charlie's surrendering to the

Committee of Inspection all the valuable horses, carriages, and pictures that had been given him at various times by grandmother.

The sum which these realized had been accepted only on the stipulation that if an eligible purchaser came forward, Mrs. Westbrook should instantly be removed and a proportionate part of the money refunded.

A week before her death, a fabulously wealthy manufacturer—whose interest in a multitude of gin-palaces had not prevented his being honoured with a baronetcy—appeared on the scene, and offered to lay down at once the purchase-money, not only for Westbrook Hall, but for all its belongings, if he might obtain immediate possession. The Trustee-in-Bankruptcy, though genuinely sorry for its ruined proprietress, durst not refuse so good an offer, hence the relief we experienced when death came in the guise of a welcome messenger to save the heart-broken woman the added pain and humiliation of being evicted from her old home.

Charlie and I drove away from the Hall immediately after the funeral in a manner befitting my brother's change of fortune. This time no emblazoned carriage with pawing horses and gorgeously attired coachman and footman served us. Ours was a hired vehicle, its driver clad in a dark-blue coat adorned with plated buttons much the worse for wear.

Charlie was far too deeply absorbed in gloomy thoughts to notice such trifles. He sat motionless until we reached a turn in the drive where the front of Westbrook Hall came full into our view, whereupon he leaned forward and gazed fixedly at the house till its last chimney-top passed out of sight. With a sigh he muttered, 'What an awful mess I made of my life up

there! I have been weighed in the balances and found wanting, and the kingdom has departed from me. And yet, can you credit it?'—here he turned sharply round and looked me full in the face—'at times I am such an egregious ass as to believe that if Westbrook Hall were my own, I should redeem my lost opportunities. God knows me better than I know myself, and I ought to feel profoundly thankful for His goodness in giving me health to work at a worthy profession. In saner moments I recognize my weakness, and know well enough that the valley and not the hill-top is the safer place for me—a poor fool who has barely escaped the total wreck of body and soul.'

I could not bear to hear Charlie talk in this strain, and broke in abruptly: 'Do not say you did no good at Westbrook Hall; why, you were a real blessing to grandmother during these last weeks.'

'Last weeks!' he repeated mechanically. 'But what of the other weeks, months, even years I lived there? Why was not such influence exerted sooner? It would have been, if I had remained faithful to grandfather's teachings.'

I perceived that in this mood of self-accusation it was impossible for me to console him, so the remainder of the long dreary drive passed in silence. At last we reached our home, and, as I stood in the old panelled hall, I realized with strangely mingled feelings of regret and satisfaction that Westbrook Hall, with all its possibilities for good or evil, had passed away for ever from our lives.

CHAPTER XVII

LIGHT AMONGST THE CLOUDS

The mirage shall become a pool.—ISAIAH.

THUS ended Charlie's brief experience of fortune and social influence. When this great change in his circumstances became known amongst his friends it called forth many expressions of sympathy, nor was such sympathy confined to mere words. Several in a position to do so made substantial offers of assistance, foremost among them being Dr. Brown, who, completely overcome by the sudden reversal of his plans, was anxious to help. Colonel Mowbray also, believing my brother to be penniless, urged him in the most affectionate language to allow him to charge himself with his future career. Needless to say, Charlie was profoundly touched by the real friendship which breathed in these generous offers; but as he was determined to rely on his own exertions, he declined them all.

There was really no occasion for the pity so lavishly bestowed upon him in his changed prospects; he soon became a happier man than he had ever been at Westbrook Hall, for he was now able to devote all his time and thought to his profession. As a consequence he became so fascinated by his calling that, had he sought the wide world over, he could never have found any niche in life's gallery which would have suited him

better. He was a born doctor, not merely made so by dint of cramming and examination. His ruling passion became a desire to assuage suffering, and to grapple like Hercules with death itself.

As his character developed, he became increasingly unselfish and more thoughtful for those in distress of any kind. Of course this change developed gradually. At first, after grandmother's death, when he had more time to think, his thoughts morbidly fastened on his recent reverses. For a time he became painfully depressed, and a prey to accusing memory and bitter regret—a condition scarcely to be wondered at, for both mind and body had been strained to the utmost during the past year. He refused even to leave the house or to see his friends, but one Sunday he yielded to my earnest solicitations and accompanied me to our little chapel, around which so many associations gathered.

He took his place in the corner of the square, old-fashioned pew opposite to mine, and I saw that he was greatly moved as a flood of recollections poured in upon his mind. Once as an innocent child, then as a light-hearted boy, he had sat Sabbath after Sabbath beside the guardians of his earliest years. A brief attempt at self-control, and then those tender memories so unnerved him that he buried his face in his hands to conceal his feelings. As if to enhance the effect, the good folk crowded about us after service to welcome us back among them.

Their simple kindness so touched him that, anxious above all things to live as his grandfather had done, he united himself in fellowship with these people. In his present state of mind even their dogmatic belief in their own infallibility had a charm for him. He knew how

far he had gone astray, perhaps felt even too keenly his own weakness, and therefore judged it safer to hand himself over to the guidance of men who possessed strength of character if not breadth of vision.

I need scarcely add that the advent of such a plastic disciple—one who subscribed without reserve to their customs and shibboleths—was much to their liking. Great were the rejoicings, and many the tea-drinkings, that celebrated the entrance into their fold of this lost sheep, who came and entrusted himself so confidently to the sway of their pastoral crooks.

It could hardly be expected that Dr. Brown should view with complacency this newly developed phase in Charlie's character, and after a visit which proved unsatisfactory to both parties, in a fit of prudence foreign to his nature, and dictated solely by strong affection, he said to me : ' I must keep out of the boy's way just now. With this latest set of advisers he has taken to himself, he won't think me a safe or desirable acquaintance ! Still,' he added, with a curious contraction of features, ' I'd rather see him a whining Puritan than a drunken profligate ! But let us hope for better things. I believe he's a good lad, and has the making of a fine man in him. We must remember he has had a tremendous upset ; give him time, and he'll settle clear enough when the lees sink to the bottom.'

Charlie was so unlike his usual self that he never noticed that the doctor ceased his visits to us, and the two did not meet again before my brother quitted Charnham to pursue his medical studies in London.

The day he left he slipped into my hand a small leather case, saying, ' Kate, will you keep this for me ? It was grannie's gift. I am better without it ; it only awakens useless regrets.'

After he had gone I opened the case, took out a locket, and found—as I had expected—a miniature of Alicia. The painter had caught her happiest expression, and as I gazed on the beautiful beaming countenance I felt sure it was much better for Charlie's peace of mind that he had surrendered the portrait into my possession.

He wrote to me frequently, every letter manifesting a growing interest in his work; but I saw very little of him during the next twelve months. Fortunately, in London, he formed acquaintance with men whose catholicity of spirit, joined with strong religious principle, did him a world of good. His return to Charnham, however, brought bitter disappointment to his former spiritual guides. They declared that their promising pupil had degenerated; and when, in spite of their remonstrances, he resumed his affectionate intercourse with Dr. Brown, nothing remained for them but to shake their heads dismally and say, 'There is a marked falling away in our young brother, a lamentable return to the flesh-pots of Egypt, a perilous tendency of that latitudinarian spirit which so sadly characterized his grandfather, Dr. Leigh!'

Charlie was indeed growing mentally and spiritually after the likeness of our beloved grandfather, and the brightest dreams that I had ever conceived of what a brother could be to me began to be fulfilled. Not only was he affectionate and considerate, but he became prime companion and adviser in my religious work.

During vacation he would make his way home to Charnham, and would throw his utmost sympathy and energy into my labours amongst the sick; in fact, he out-distanced me altogether, till I came to think of him as an example of devotion to the Master's cause. Not that

he agreed with me in this idealization of himself—far from it. Never for a moment did he forget how weak he had been, and how his sin had scorched him ; hence he never assumed pharisaical airs, nor spoke with an air of spiritual egotism. I was not alone in my estimate of him ; in fact, some who were deeply prejudiced against religion because of its professors, found their hostility melted away as they came into contact with him.

Thus three years slipped by peacefully. Meanwhile Charlie passed his examinations successfully, and found an ever increasing delight in philanthropic work. On one of his last visits to Charnham he became interested in a cottage meeting I had started. He helped with such vigour that our small room was soon overcrowded. We then hired a hall, and Charlie essaying to preach, the people flocked to hear him.

One evening Mr. Edmondson, the pastor of our church, stole in cautiously, and out again as carefully ere the meeting closed. This he did several times, till one evening Charlie asked him to take charge of the service. But this only frightened him away, for there were his energetic deacons to be considered. It was different with many of his younger members ; they became concerned, and then began—what our elders dreaded—a revival in our midst.

Ominous mutterings were heard, dark looks were turned on my brother and his band of helpers, and dissatisfaction grew in high quarters. Matters at length reached a climax when Mr. Edmondson announced at the monthly church meeting that twelve candidates desired admission into the church, professing to have been converted at Mr. Westbrook's mission-hall.

Then the storm burst. Mr. Munro rose and bitterly

denounced these new-fangled ways, which entailed a departure from the old paths. He inveighed against hasty conversion under the influence of excited feeling, the while he mopped his perspiring brow with a blue-spotted handkerchief. He dogmatically declared that it was absolutely impossible in so short a time to experience deep conviction and sorrow for sin, the necessary accompaniments of the true work of the Spirit.

When Mr. Munro paused to use his handkerchief once again, an aged member chimed in, with shaking head and quavering voice : ‘ Right, Brother Munro ! Why, when I was seeking the Lord, my sins weighed upon me for months in agony of soul. I, too, say, “ None of your hasty conversions ; go on, brother ! ” ’

‘ If we admit these ignorant, ungrounded young people,’ continued Munro, ‘ I foresee nothing but years of misery and disgrace to us all, for I firmly believe they are building on the sand of mere emotion. My motto has ever been, “ Slow and sure.” I therefore propose that these twelve candidates wait six months ; if they are still in the same mind at the end of that period, then we can take into consideration the desirability of their uniting with us in fellowship. I once acted too hastily, and was deceived, in a certain case ’— here he cast an ominous glance at Charlie—‘ and before I sit down I desire to move a vote of censure on Mr. Westbrook’s mode of preaching at his mission-hall. It is most irregular, and all the more dangerous because it contains some measure of truth. We know that rats can’t be caught with arsenic, unless it is spread on good bread-and-butter ! ’

Under the stress of the situation, even Mr. Baker found his tongue ; he rose and said, very slowly and in disjointed fashion, ‘ I—beg—to—second Mr.—Munro’s

—proposition—and—vote—of—censure.’ Then he sat down, amazed at his own loquacity.

Mr. Edmondson rose, and we all expected that he would merely take the vote of the meeting ; but to our astonishment he said, in decided tones, ‘ Brethren, before I call upon you to vote on this very important matter, I have a word to say. I wish it to be clearly understood that my opinions are diametrically opposed to those that our honoured deacon, Mr. Munro, has just urged upon us.’ A buzz of astonishment at these daring words ran through the meeting. ‘ I claim to speak with knowledge, for I have been many times an eyewitness of the work carried on by Mr. Westbrook, and long ere this I ought to have spoken out manfully. I went to hear him in fear and trembling ; but instead of dangerous and irregular teaching, I listened to nothing but the plain truth, spoken in powerful, heart-searching language. I am not at all surprised at the result. God has honoured the faithful delivery of His message through His servant, and with all my heart I wish him God-speed in his glorious work. I have dealt first with the vote of censure on Mr. Westbrook’s work because it affects the proposal concerning the twelve candidates. I cannot see why messengers should not be appointed to visit them in accordance with our usual custom ; I have examined each one carefully, and at the proper time I can give you a satisfactory account of their spiritual condition. Before I sit down, let me add a word concerning myself. I have been humbled greatly of late, for the zeal manifested by my juniors has brought condemnation to myself.’ In accents of deep emotion he concluded : ‘ I have been but a barren fig-tree, I fear—a cumberer of the ground ; but henceforth, with God’s help, I will be up and doing.’

The unfortunate deacons, stunned and aghast at their pastor thus breaking from their leading-strings, remained silent the while they gathered their scattered wits together. This hesitation proved their ruin. A young member sprang to his feet and moved as an amendment that Mr. Munro's proposal should be rejected, and that in its place prayer and praise should be offered for the glorious work now going on at the mission-hall.

This proposal was immediately seconded and carried, and the prayer-meeting which followed was totally unlike anything ever heard before in the white-washed, low-roofed building. I am glad to be able to say that Mr. Edmondson kept his promise; the church awoke to its responsibility, and to its faith it added charity, since which time it has never returned to its slumbers.

Of course many difficulties and prejudices had to be encountered, but gradually the better influence prevailed, and the bigoted spirit that had once characterized this church almost disappeared. True, Mr. Munro, Mr. Baker, and a few of the older members sighed and groaned over the changes that had taken place; still I question if they would have been content to return to the narrow modes of thought which had prevailed during the period of my childhood and youth.

A few days after this memorable church-meeting, Charlie entered my room with a very grave face, and said to me, 'Kate, do you know Ashton is dying? He has hurt his knee badly, and the doctors, knowing his intemperate habits, dared not risk amputation; mortification has set in, and there is now no hope for his recovery. Directly I heard about it I rode over to the Priory to see Miss Ashton, who poured out a piteous tale: how that in spite of all her entreaties her brother would see no clergyman, swearing that he would die as

he had lived, and not turn into a canting sneak at last. I pressed her to let me see him, and with much trepidation she took me into his room and said, "Harry, I have brought an old friend, Mr. Westbrook, to see you!"

"What, Westbrook!" Ashton roared, with an oath. "That cad! How dare you let him come in here!" And he worked himself into such a rage that I felt compelled to leave. Poor fellow! there was nothing else to be done.'

'Is there absolutely no hope?' I asked.

'None whatever!'

'In that case,' I said, 'I will try to see him. He liked me once; it is possible he may let me speak to him. If so, I cannot let him die like this.'

'You will do no such thing,' replied my brother hastily; 'you don't know what you are talking about. It is not fit for you to be with him; and besides, he is half mad. I absolutely forbid you to go.'

'Oh, Charlie, don't! It seems to me my plain duty. I must go, for I am sure it is the right thing.'

'Well, if you feel so, I suppose I must give in, but I must go too,' said my brother reluctantly and with emphasis.

'No, no! you must let me see him alone, or else you will destroy the very small chance I have of getting him to listen to me.'

'Oh, of course!' he exclaimed; 'there is nothing like the obstinacy of a woman! You cannot conceive how I dread the thought of your coming into contact with that man.'

'What nonsense! How can you be afraid of a poor creature who can't even move out of his bed? It is absurd; I don't understand you.'

You may think it absurd, but, I tell you, you may get such a fright as may injure you for life. However, I see it's no use talking, so get ready, 'and we'll go in half an hour.'

Throughout the long drive to the Priory Charlie made me clearly feel his disapproval; but it did not shake my determination, nor did I falter when I met Miss Ashton and told her the errand on which I had come.

She seemed astonished, and exclaimed, using my brother's very words: 'It is not fit for you to see him; he is dreadful just now. My poor Harry! For some time after your brother's visit he was like a maniac.'

'But I am not my brother,' I replied. 'Please let me slip quietly into his room unannounced.'

'I would give anything if he could be brought into a different frame of mind,' she cried, looking at me tearfully. 'It is awful for him to die like this; but it is not right that you should run any risk.'

However, I persevered in my request, and the poor girl, worn out with grief and weary vigils, gave way. 'As you are so determined,' said she, 'it is nearly time for him to take his medicine; you can give it him if you like. It is as good a chance as you will have.'

I laid aside my hat and cloak, and followed her softly into Sir Henry's room. I insisted on being left alone with him, so she beckoned the nurse away, and the door closed gently behind them. I waited till the time came to give the medicine, then I approached the bedside. The patient lay with eyes closed, breathing heavily, though not asleep, as the restless movement of his hands plainly showed. His face was bloated, and wore such a sinister expression that my heart sank within me at the task I had undertaken. But only for a moment. I

believed that I had been sent by my Heavenly Father, and, breathing a hurried petition to Him for the necessary wisdom, I gently touched Sir Henry's hand. Slowly the heavy eyelids lifted, and he snapped, 'Curse you! can't you leave me alone when I am quiet?'

He did not recognize me, and took me for the nurse or his much-enduring sister; but while in the act of drinking the medicine his eyes suddenly fell on my face. He started, letting the glass slip from his trembling fingers, and exclaimed, 'So it's you, you vixen, is it? Not satisfied with poisoning my existence, you must come and gloat over the result of your work! Out of my sight this instant!'

I took a cloth to wipe up the spilt medicine, leaning over him incautiously as I did so. Before I realized the danger, my throat was clasped tightly between his two hands, and he muttered viciously, 'Why should not I throttle you and finish the gay dance you have led me? We might as well go out of the world together!'

Half choking under his grasp, I could not call for help; besides, I felt sure that my one chance of escape lay in not arousing his passion further. I made no attempt, therefore, to free myself, although his hot breath seemed to scorch my cheeks, and his eyes glared at me like those of some fierce animal.

This conduct doubtless saved me, for his mood changed, the wild look left his face, his hands relaxed their hold, and he murmured faintly, 'No, no! I cannot find it in my heart to hurt you!' Then he sank back on his pillows exhausted.

I did not stir from the bedside, and after a few moments he gasped, 'Why don't you call for help? I must have almost frightened you to death.'

‘I do not need help, and I am not in the least afraid of you, Sir Henry, or I should not be here.’

‘Well, you ought to be, then, that’s all! You did a precious mad trick when you trusted yourself near me! I was nearly doing for you. But there, you always had any amount of pluck. Now, what do you want with me?’

These last words were spoken so gently that, what with my nerves being upset by his action and with my grief at the sight of his pitiful condition, I burst into tears.

‘What, crying?’ he exclaimed. ‘Why waste tears over a wretch like me? I know you are sorry, and that is enough.’

‘Sorry? Yes, I am sorry!’ I sobbed.

Whereupon he took my hand in his, pressed it to his lips, and said, in broken accents, ‘I’d have been a different man had you consented to be my wife. As it is, I’ve been worse than a beast, and I can’t change now; it’s too late!’

‘No, no! while life lasts, it is never too late,’ I cried. Then, sinking on my knees, I prayed aloud, though my voice was half choked with sobs. Rising, I tried to tell him how the Saviour came for just such as he, and how the thief on the cross had received pardon just a few hours before his death. Poor fellow! he wept like a child. I had soon to cease speaking, for he became utterly exhausted; but when I bade him good-bye he whispered, ‘Send your brother to me; I have no time to lose. But please give me one kiss before you go; we shall never meet again in this world.’

I bent over him, kissed his forehead, and then left him. Outside the door I found Miss Ashton and Charlie anxiously awaiting me. I delivered Sir Henry’s

message, and having allowed him time to recover from his exhaustion, Charlie went in and remained with him until the end came. As they talked, Ashton's mind went back to that first meeting with me, when I had pleaded so hard for his dog.

'Ah!' he cried, 'I have been a bully all my days, always seizing any opportunity of breaking the weak.'

'How unlike the Father, who ever gives the fallen a chance!' There was something in Charlie's manner, as he made this comment, that seemed to arrest the dying man's attention, for he exclaimed wonderingly:

'I never thought of Him in that way before. Now I am down, won't He take advantage of me?'

'No, Henry, He never will. Will you let me pray with you?'

'Do,' came the reply; 'and tell Him—I'm down—it's fair—I deserve to be.—But tell Him—I trust Him——'

The sufferer was strangely still, and ere the prayer was ended he had passed out of the conflict. He lay there without a trace of agony or dread on his countenance; his features were smoothed out like an infant's, for the Father had remembered mercy.

CHAPTER XVIII

A FIT OF JEALOUSY

AFTER the events recorded in the last chapter Charlie returned to London, and from various allusions in his letters I gathered that he was working too hard. He had, of course, to attend to his hospital work and prepare for his examinations, but besides these necessary labours he was evidently engaged in mission work, preaching in the open air, and in visiting.

Following a brilliant success in his final exam., which secured him his diplomas in medicine and surgery, it was not surprising to me that his health should break down suddenly. The doctors forbade him to do any work, and prescribed a long sea-voyage. Charlie was much chagrined at their decision; it seemed such a waste of precious time to leave the country just as he had equipped himself for his life's work. Besides, he grieved at leaving me alone; and when we parted on the deck of the vessel bound for Brisbane, his composure quite failed him. 'Good-bye, my darling,' he whispered, giving me a last embrace; 'may we soon meet never to part again, for you are all I have, save grannie.'

I returned home, feeling as though the world had moved on and left me behind. The house seemed silent as the grave, and the thought that haunted me

was that minute by minute increased the distance between my only real companion and me.

He had hardly been gone a month when my grandmother Leigh became alarmingly ill. She gradually grew weaker and weaker in body and mind, and ceased to take any notice either of Miss Gregg or myself; and after a few days of acute pain she passed peacefully away. People seemed surprised that I grieved so much over her loss; some even spoke of her death as a mercy for me. They forgot that I had always loved to be with her and attend to her wants; that for years she had been the one object of my care, and that she was the last link connecting Charlie and myself with a happy past. My loneliness was complete.

Such being my state of mind I welcomed an imperative call to some hard and trying work. A severe epidemic of scarlet fever broke out in Charnham, and attacked all classes alike. The rich had difficulty in obtaining nurses; as for the poor, they were indeed badly off. I had suffered from this complaint in childhood, and, as it happened, I had some knowledge of nursing; so, with several others, I flung myself into the breach. After some weeks the epidemic subsided; and as soon as rest was possible, with Miss Gregg as my companion, I betook myself to Brighton for change of air and scene. Then came an invitation from my ever-considerate friend Dr. Brown, asking us both to join him in London. We did so, and ere long we were ensconced at a comfortable hotel in Piccadilly. Not that I was equal to much exertion as yet; I was still languid and listless, but I enjoyed walking and driving in the parks and participating to a limited extent in the stir and bustle of the City.

On the second Sunday that we spent in town, Dr. Brown

surprised me by saying : ' Katherine, a great work is being done in the Ragged Schools ; will you come with me to visit one this afternoon ? It is not far from here, and I should say decidedly within the limits of your walking powers.'

The pleasure he displayed when I assented to the proposal somewhat puzzled me. Ragged Schools had never been in his line, and he had done his best in the past to pour cold water on Charlie's efforts and mine in such directions. But whatever mystery underlay this new departure of my old friend's, I could not but rejoice at his awakened interest in such matters, and we sallied forth in excellent spirits and good-humour. Gradually, however, I grew sick and faint, for, as we advanced through the ever-narrowing streets, we reached a neighbourhood where only a streak of blue sky could be seen, and where the atmosphere was foul and oppressive in the extreme.

Dirty, ill-fed, neglected children swarmed in the gutters and alleys, while women with coarse voices, unkempt hair, and tattered dresses sat on the doorsteps of squalid tenements, or stood in groups gossiping at the top of dismal courts. Wretched-looking beings with bloated countenances hung about the numerous gin-palaces, through whose half-open doors we could see crowds of drinkers spending their hard-earned wages with small regard for their needy wives and children. I kept asking myself sadly, ' Is it possible that this state of things can exist in a spot so little removed from the luxurious and fashionable part of London ? '

Depressed and saddened by these and kindred sights, I was glad when Dr. Brown stopped before a somewhat dilapidated-looking building, which he invited me to enter. We found ourselves in a large room furnished

with forms, on which were seated a number of girls and boys, in classes arranged according to their respective sex and capacity.

The superintendent hastened to greet us, and Dr. Brown asked him some question, the purport of which I did not catch, though the answer was distinctly audible :

‘Certainly, with the greatest pleasure ! One of our best lady-teachers ; you will not disturb her—our time is nearly up. This way, if you please.’

We followed him down the long room amid the stares and whispers of the children, till we reached a door at the end which he gently opened, motioning us to enter. We did so, but nothing uncommon greeted our view : only a sight which may be seen in many parts of England on any Sunday afternoon—a young lady teaching a band of scholars. These particular ones belonged to a lower grade of society than the neat lads and lassies that are generally to be found in our schools. They were rough, uncouth-looking little beings, dressed in short shabby skirts, with shawls crossed over their bodices, and their thick hair, guiltless of hat or any other covering, was trimmed in front to a heavy fringe that by no means added to their personal attractions. They sat clustered round their teacher, listening eagerly to the Bible lesson ; when one, catching sight of us, cried out, ‘ Please, miss, there’s an old gent and a lidy a-watchin’ of us.’

The teacher turned quickly round, and, to my utter amazement, disclosed the well-known features of Alicia Spencer. She recognized me at once ; her dark lustrous eyes glowed with delight, and springing impetuously from her chair she was about to rush towards me, when, suddenly remembering the past, she

checked herself and paused confusedly. Dr. Brown, noticing her hesitation, went forward and, taking her hand, led her up to me, saying encouragingly, 'Dear Miss Spencer, have I not contrived a charming surprise? I knew how pleased both you and Katherine would be to meet once more.'

Before she could reply the bell rang for closing school, and teacher and class hurried to their seats in the larger room. A hymn was sung, and words of prayer uttered, but I heeded neither; my heart and brain were on fire. Dr. Brown had called our meeting 'a charming surprise'! It might be such to Alicia; as for me, I was furious. I recognized what meeting with my brother's old love in such a place meant for me. She had become religious, and was still unmarried; no barrier now existed between Charlie and herself, if they chose to renew their engagement. I knew his mind full well, and before long I felt equally sure of hers.

After dismissing the girls she hastened to speak to me; and the shy, beseeching look on her winsome face ought to have disarmed me. Unfortunately it did nothing of the kind, and in my present state of mind it was with great effort that I uttered a few civil words of congratulation on the number of her scholars and their manifest attachment to her. Dr. Brown pressed her to visit us the next day, and she consented with an excited blush that made me positively irritable.

I walked back to the hotel by the side of the intermeddling Doctor, scarce replying to his self-congratulatory explanations as to how he had accidentally come across Mr. Spencer and had found out that his daughter was still single. In the course of their conversation he had discovered that her father was

much perplexed and distressed by her new opinions and practices, and by her constant hankering after young Westbrook, who was 'just such another Methodistical fool as herself.' Hearing Mr. Spencer talk in this manner, the vicar had pictured to himself what a good thing it would be if Charlie married her. She was wealthy and beautiful—a far better match than he could hope to make in his present position. So he had cast about in his mind how a reconciliation could be effected. He had learned from her father that she regularly taught in this school, hence his piloting of me thither, and his delight at what he thought was a successful stroke of policy.

I scarcely made a single comment throughout our walk back to Piccadilly; but he was not a close observer, and no doubt put down my silence to excitement and over-fatigue, little suspecting the real nature of my feelings.

When we reached the hotel I left him, and went straight to my room on the plea of not feeling very well, which was true enough. Having locked the door, I gave way to an agony of grief. 'Give up Charlie! my Charlie!' I repeated again and again as I paced distractedly up and down the chamber, far too wretched and restless to sit still. And to have to give him up to the girl who had so shamefully jilted him! I was furious with my old friend's interference. 'This foolish man has blundered enough,' I kept repeating to myself; 'he nearly succeeded in ruining him body and soul in his insane desire to see him master of Westbrook Hall; and now, when he and I have become all in all to each other, he has gone and planned this meeting.' For the time being I hated him almost as much as I did Alicia. I congratulated myself, however, on the

prudence which had made me hold my tongue so that he had no idea what my real sentiments were in this matter. He imagined that I should be his puppet and willingly co-operate in his fine plans. Well, he would find out that he was mistaken.

I slept but little that night, and the morning found me unchanged in my evil purpose. Alicia called as arranged at our hotel, and Dr. Brown, still in the fond belief that he was furthering Charlie's interests, contrived that she should find me alone, the thing I most desired.

She entered the room with all the freshness of a June rose, buoyant in spirits and full of delight at seeing me again. 'Kate, how good it was of you to come and see me yesterday; it was indeed a charming surprise,' she began affectionately.

'Indeed!' I answered coldly. 'It was equally a surprise to me, as Dr. Brown had never hinted whom I should have the pleasure of meeting at the Ragged School.'

'What!' she cried; 'you did not then come on purpose to see me?' And, incapable as in the past of disguising her feelings, her lips trembled and her high spirits gave place to evident disappointment.

However, I wished for no scene; so quietly ignoring her question, I immediately turned the conversation on less dangerous subjects, and inquired after the health of her parents. When we had exhausted this topic, I managed for a time to confine it to the weather and other ordinary matters, and under the influence of my freezing politeness her warm manner sensibly cooled. As she rose to go she invited me rather stiffly to return her visit, to which I responded frigidly, 'I trust you will excuse me, seeing that my further stay in London is to be very limited.'

My words had their designed effect, and I saw once more before me the haughty Miss Spencer of old. Throwing back her queenly head, she bowed a half-scornful assent to my refusal, and without offering her hand or bidding me further farewell she left the room.

Dr. Brown was much surprised on his return to find that Alicia had left, and broadly hinted that he would like to hear some particulars of our interview ; but I took no notice of his hints, and laughed in my sleeve at his bewilderment when, on his suggesting that we should return her call, I flatly refused to do so.

Poor man ! He requested to know my reason, and on my declining to explain, in much perplexity he betook himself to Alicia. But although she gave him a cordial reception, she provided him with no more explanation than I of our attitude towards each other.

Thus I succeeded in my selfish purpose, surrendering myself unresistingly to the demon of jealousy which had found so easy a lodgement in my bosom. I stifled the better promptings of my conscience by professing to myself that Alicia would be now an utterly unsuitable wife for Charlie. Of course I would tell him everything on his return, and he could then seek her if he were so inclined ; yet I was well aware that all the chances were against this. He might possibly have sought her had he remained master of Westbrook Hall, but in his present position it was unthinkable. No ; it was almost a certainty that by acting as I had done I should succeed in keeping him to myself, and yet be able to lay the flattering unction to my soul that I had done nothing dishonourable.

Happily I had not reached that state of callousness in which I could act thus without qualms of conscience. I

was perfectly wretched ; I could neither eat nor sleep, and became fretful and bad-tempered.

One morning I spoke so sharply to Miss Gregg about some little mistake of hers that she quitted the room in tears. Then Dr. Brown came into the room, and as I continued harping on this grievance of mine, he said good-naturedly, 'Come, Katherine, the thing is not worth making a fuss over or losing your temper about.'

'Other people,' I retorted, with some heat, 'lose their temper quite as much as I do. It is a pity people do not practise what they preach.'

Never before in the whole course of our acquaintance had I spoken so rudely to him, and he winced visibly at my impertinence. His face, always ruddy, became scarlet ; yet he replied quietly, 'I am sure no one deserves such a rebuke more than I do, but you are the last person that I expected it from.'

Ashamed of myself, but still far too angry to apologize, I hurried away to my room and gave way to a burst of tears. Every one was unkind, every one wanted to take Charlie from me ! And, if they did, life was no longer worth living. Oh, fate was hard and cruel ! God might have spared him to me, we were so happy together.

As I uttered these words, all at once their true significance burst upon me. Why, it was God Himself whom I was accusing of hardness and cruelty ! and the shock brought me to my senses. Had I, a child of God, sunk to this ? Then, indeed, I was in a desperate state ; the true aspect of my late conduct had suddenly revealed itself.

Troubled beyond measure, I flung myself on my knees and cried out for the Lord to help me, as a frightened child cries to its mother. I had forgotten

and forsaken Him, but He had neither forgotten nor forsaken His poor erring child ; and it was He who had now laid His finger on my secret sin and discovered its vileness to me.

I did not cry in vain, for after a while I came to feel that God must be trusted with such matters, and a sweet sense of forgiveness and peace took possession of my breast. As I yielded Charlie unreservedly to Him, and to Alicia if He willed it, the ugly demon of jealous hatred fled away for ever, and I was able—though in a minor key—to sing, ‘Thy way, not mine, O Lord.’

It was a painful discovery to me that my love for Charlie had been mingled with such intense selfishness that, when his interests crossed mine, I had not scrupled to sacrifice them and wreck his happiness.

I rose from my knees a changed woman, and I determined at once to try to undo the evil I had done. The first step was to seek Dr. Brown, apologize for my impertinent speech, and confess how disgracefully I had acted towards Alicia.

I went downstairs to the sitting-room and found him seated there alone reading. Unable to speak, however, I could only lay my hand upon his shoulder. He looked up, and seeing my eyes full of tears, inquired anxiously, ‘My dear, what is the matter? Are you not well, or are you in trouble?’

Kneeling beside him, I told him everything, keeping nothing back, and asked him to forgive me.

He placed his hand gently on my head, and replied, ‘Why, Katherine, of course I will ; but I don’t really understand the drift of the matter. I am sure you could not do a selfish thing : you are too much like your dear grandfather, and he never did a mean thing in his life. The fact is you are not well, nor yourself,

my child ; that explains everything. My repeated attempts to take your brother from you must have been very aggravating. I had never given a thought to that side of the question ; and all I can say is that I would not hurt my little favourite, no, not for a dozen Miss Spencers. So suppose we let the matter drop entirely.'

I protested as well as my feelings would let me. 'What! you won't hear of such a thing? You will go and see her and put things straight? Well, you're a true lassie, and I could wish you were as good a Church-woman. However, that is hardly your fault, considering the way you have been brought up.' In this manner did my partial old friend blind his eyes to the heinousness of my conduct.

I went straight from him to Miss Gregg and made a like confession, which she received in a proper spirit, wisely giving me to see that I had deserved censure. But—'Faithful are the wounds of a friend.' Perhaps she was a better friend to me than Dr. Brown, inasmuch as she found it impossible to alter her standard of right merely because I admitted myself to be the culprit.

So far I had succeeded beyond my desires in repairing the wrong I had done, but there remained Alicia Spencer to settle with. How to remedy the wrong I had done her was a question which perplexed me for some time. After much consideration I judged it best to try to obtain a personal interview, so when luncheon was over I drove direct to her father's house in Kensington.

On the way thither my mind was torn by conflicting emotions. One moment I said to myself, 'She will absolutely refuse to see me.' Then reason prompted the thought: 'If she loves your brother she will concern

herself little about your conduct, if you can but assure her of his ardent affection.' Thus, alternately elated and depressed, I reached her house and learned to my relief that she was at home and disengaged.

The footman conducted me through a handsome hall into a large and fashionably furnished drawing-room, where I sat waiting with a beating heart while he departed to seek his young mistress. In a few moments the door opened, and I felt a sensation as of choking when Alicia stood before me. She greeted me with a gentle dignity that I had never remarked in her before.

This time the tables were turned; I was the one who was shy and discomposed. But, afraid of being interrupted and thus losing my precious opportunity, I made a tremendous effort and blurted out: 'Miss Spencer, I must tell you the real object of my visit: I have come hither to plead my brother's cause. He cannot do it himself, for he is hundreds of miles away; but he loves you devotedly, and almost his last words, as we parted on the ship's deck, were, "I shall never marry; I cannot forget Alicia." I know you are now far above him in position; yet, when he was your equal he sought you——'

Here Alicia, in the greatest agitation, exclaimed, 'Not my equal? Stop, stop! You don't know what you are saying. No; you are right; I am not his equal: not worthy to kiss the ground on which his feet tread. But I love him—oh, yes! And, fool that I was, I loved him even when I tormented him by my silly flirtations.'

For the second time that day I gave way to tears, so great was my relief at finding that I had not injured Charlie's interest by my mean conduct. Suddenly the

ludicrous aspect of our weeping struck us both, and in a trice we were laughing through our tears.

‘What shall you do if callers are announced?’ I asked.

Alicia smiled and replied, ‘Oh, this will never do! We must control ourselves.’ Then, forgetting possible callers and everything else, she exclaimed, ‘But how can I ever be grateful enough to you for assuring me that in spite of my past folly Charlie still loves me? You dear, generous girl!’ And she kissed me passionately on either cheek.

‘Don’t say one word about my generosity,’ I cried with fervour. ‘I have acted abominably; so furiously jealous was I of you, that I did all in my power the other day to keep you apart for my own selfish ends.’

‘And a very natural thing to do. But it is awfully good of you coming to see me at all.’ Although I did my utmost to convey to her clearly a sense of my meanness, she wilfully closed her eyes; and, waiving my protestation of guilt, she continued: ‘Dear Kate, I owe you a deeper debt of gratitude than I can ever repay, for it was you who first made me dissatisfied with myself. After I had quarrelled with Charlie, and had found out too late how much I loved him, life became a burden to me, and I began to loathe my ordinary rounds of dissipation. One day, feeling unutterably wretched, I entered a church where services were being held, and there I came to see the reality of a personal Saviour. Life now became a new thing. I still loved Charlie, and more than ever regretted the past; but after a long time I learned to leave my future in the hands of God, and you see how good——’ Here she came to a stop, overcome by emotion.

‘But, dear Alicia,’ I interposed, ‘all is not smooth

sailing yet by any means. Whatever will your parents say to your marrying a country doctor, and a Nonconformist ?'

'Why, they will grumble over that part of the matter, of course. But there are arguments on the other side. In the first place they will be thankful to be rid of me. Since my conversion they have been as kind as possible ; still, they regard me in the light of a mild lunatic. But the second and great inducement is the possible chance of Charlie's succeeding to the earldom of Wallington owing to the many deaths that have occurred lately in the Westbrook family.' Then, observing the evident surprise written on my countenance, she asked anxiously, 'What ! Have you not heard this ?'

'No, I have never heard a single word about it.'

Her radiant face became troubled, and with manifestly painful effort she continued : 'Well, it is just this possibility which will induce my parents to consent to our re-engagement ; and on the face of things it looks as if it were the same with me. But, I assure you, I love Charlie for himself. So changed are my feelings in regard to worldly matters that, although it may sound like cant, I feel like one of those two angels in the old legend who were both equally happy and content, though one was sent to rule an empire and the other to sweep a crossing. Can I but do God's work faithfully I do not care whether I do it as a countess or as a country doctor's wife.'

Her voice, eyes, manner, her whole being carried instant conviction to my mind, and conveyed to me the certainty that my brother had nought to fear from the Alicia I saw before me.

In response I tried to tell her somewhat of the love

and respect her goodness had inspired in me ; and while I spoke her sorrowful face beamed with radiance like a grey and sombre day suddenly illuminated by the sun breaking forth from behind dark clouds. Sufficient to say, I went back to the hotel in a very different frame of mind from that in which I had set forth. For, when I came to think of it, I had not lost a brother, but I had gained an affectionate sister and friend. Another proof of the teaching : ' If any man will lose his life for My sake and the gospel's, he shall save it.'

CHAPTER XIX

THE INEXPLICABLE AT BEECHFIELD

THE following day we quitted London and returned to Charnham, and the first thing I did when I reached home was to sit down and write a full and detailed account to Charlie of all that had passed between Alicia and myself. This done, and the precious missive dispatched in time for the Australian mail, I wrote to our family lawyer, begging him to send me all particulars concerning the Westbrook family, as I thought it right that Charlie should be fully informed on the subject. From the reply I gathered the following information. Only three lives at present stood between Charlie and the earldom of Wallington. The present earl, who had succeeded his uncle, was sixty-five years of age, and had in the preceding year lost his younger son, a colonel in an Indian regiment. He had been killed in a skirmish with a hill tribe; whilst, only two months before, his elder brother had met with a terrible accident in the hunting-field, and had injured his spine so severely that he had been confined to his couch ever since without the slightest hope of recovery. He had three children, two of whom were girls; the third, a delicate baby boy, was only eighteen months old. Of course there was the possibility that the earl might lose his wife, re-marry and have other sons; but at the present moment, besides these two men, only one frail baby life stood between

Charlie and the earldom. I no longer wondered that Mr. Spencer would gladly welcome the possibility of Charlie as a suitor for his daughter's hand.

These prospects would indeed give my brother his heart's desire—which was eminently satisfactory ; but an indefinable sadness crept into my heart. Was it because everything that I had looked upon as stable had suddenly become uncertain ? I had pleased myself with imagining such a different future for Charlie—one that should be homely, useful, and retired. Now it was more than probable that he would be called upon to fill even a greater worldly position than if he had remained master of Westbrook Hall.

However, I determined to battle against all morbid thoughts on this subject, for if my brother were pleased it was my duty to acquiesce and be glad with him. I therefore did my utmost to dismiss the subject from my mind, and was able the more easily to do so as the time drew near for me to pay a visit to my old friends, George and Christine. The prospect was by no means one of unalloyed delight. There had arisen a mysterious break in my friendship with the latter, resulting in an absolute cessation of intercourse between us during the last few years. I had suffered acutely from this turn of affairs, as Christine had held the next place in my affections to Charlie. I had never allowed myself to doubt her fidelity, or to harbour any suspicion that her silence was in any way connected with the alteration in our fortunes which had occurred about the same time. In my last letter to her I had poured out my heart fully, telling her of the total loss of Mrs. Westbrook's fortune and of her conversion ; also of the happy change that had taken place in my brother. In reply I received this short and astounding note :

'Kate, dear! can you blindly trust me, and believe that never have I loved you more than at this moment? Yet, for reasons I cannot explain and which I am hopeless of ever explaining, I wish our correspondence to cease. Some day, not far distant, I trust to be able to ask you to write to me as in the happy past. Believe me, though outward expression be denied, that I am still, while memory lasts, your faithful Christine.'

I trusted her as she had asked me to do, though I often pondered over the nature of this mysterious obstacle which barred the outward expression of our love. But no light dawned on my quest, and I strove as best I might to wait patiently for the promised clearance of the mystery. I heard from others of the birth of her three children, but dared not write even a line of congratulation.

At last my faith and patience were rewarded. A few weeks after my dear old grandmother's death I received a letter from her, full of warm affection and sympathy, concluding with an almost passionate entreaty that I would make 'Beechfield'—the name of her house—my home during the absence of my brother, adding that her husband desired me to become their guest.

I had received this invitation just as I was engaged in the hard nursing necessitated by the epidemic of scarlet fever in Charnham, and naturally I had to decline it. By return of post came a second letter from Christine, expressing such bitter disappointment that I promised to visit Beechfield as soon as I was able. Hence I found myself, one morning late in August, seated in a train which was bearing me fast to Corrington. When I reached the terminus and was received by my old friend with a warm embrace, all

the misgivings which had so painfully haunted me vanished completely.

As we drove away from the station she turned her face, full of tears and smiles like an April day, and exclaimed, with a tight grasp of my hand, 'Oh, Kate, if you knew the longing that has sometimes possessed me just to catch a glimpse of your dear face! And to think I have you at last; it seems too good to be true! But how pale and thin you look: you are a mere shadow of your former self. It was really wicked of you to overdo your strength in nursing those Charnham people.'

We called for George at his office on our way, and, after according me as warm a welcome as his wife had done, he too remarked anxiously on my looks.

They lived four miles out of Corrington; and, gradually leaving the town behind, we drove through wide streets lined with handsome suburban residences, then on through green shady lanes, until we reached their house, an old picturesque brick building, half covered with Virginian creepers now all aflame in brilliant autumn tints.

The large, old-fashioned garden was shut in from the road by a long, straight wall, overhung with tall trees, and was entered at either end by heavy iron gates which opened on to a semi-circular drive round a well-kept lawn up to the front door. The quaintness of the place quite took my fancy.

As we descended from the carriage we were greeted by the two children and the nurse, who was holding the baby in her arms. Chrissie, the eldest, took my heart by storm; she was the image of her mother, whilst her brother, who was between two and three years of age, seemed a jolly little fellow, brimful of life and mischief.

Beechfield proved in many ways an attractive house to stay in. Christine was an excellent housewife, and everything ran smoothly as far as the children and servants were concerned. Yet on the very first evening my misgivings, which had been lulled to sleep by the warm reception I had received, awoke once more. After the first excitement of welcoming me had worn off, it became painfully evident that the relations between my host and hostess were frequently strained. The latter often indulged in bitter speeches levelled at her husband, which as a rule he endured in moody silence. I began to wonder whether their marriage was a failure after all. I knew that in the past Christine had loved little, and 'George greatly ; was the result disastrous? What else save domestic unhappiness could have soured my old playmate's sweet temper and changed George into a morose and gloomy man? No doubt my perception of their faults was quickened by the fact that I had some ground of offence against them, for I speedily discovered that no mention of my brother would be tolerated at Beechfield. Naturally I had spoken about him, at which both husband and wife had looked unmistakably annoyed. After a marked pause George, in the coldest manner, had formally inquired after his welfare. His conduct appeared to me so inexplicable that, after a few minutes' consideration, I concluded that I had made a mistake, and in order to dispel any remaining suspicion, directly I found myself alone with Christine I again turned the conversation purposely on Charlie. This time she appeared more embarrassed than annoyed, but so markedly did she change the subject that I resolved never to mention his name again while I remained their guest. Such behaviour was unintelligible to me, for it did not tally in

the least with my previous knowledge of their characters. It seemed on the face of it impossible that two generous-hearted people should cherish resentment for so many years against a mere youth, however rudely and foolishly he might have behaved, so that his sister should not be permitted even to allude to his existence in their presence. Was this small-mindedness the barrier which had stopped my correspondence with Christine? The very idea of such a thing worried me, and I should have been miserable at Beechfield had not my host and hostess displayed the greatest anxiety to promote my enjoyment in every other respect. It followed naturally that, all mention of Charlie being tabooed, Charnham and our old life shared the same fate, and conversation became confined to present subjects. Nevertheless it did not languish, for we were mutually interested in the children and in various matters of domestic life. Still, there was one thing always appearing on the surface—that lack of compatibility between the pair, and at last I decided to risk a word on the subject. Alas! the opportunity was not far to seek.

One morning George, who was generally punctual, did not make his appearance till fully ten minutes after the breakfast gong had rung. As he entered the room Christine exclaimed irritably, 'How very late you are! It is most provoking; everything is cold and spoilt.'

'Well, what did you wait for? I should have been here in good time if one of your well-trained maids had not hidden away an important paper, with her detestable straightening and dusting. I have been looking for it everywhere.'

'I suppose you have looked in your own bag?

No? I thought not.' Then, summoning the maid, she said, 'Mary, fetch your master's black bag.' A moment's search and she drew out a closely written paper, held it up to view, and remarked scornfully, 'Of course this cannot be it, as you have looked everywhere! But I saw you put this in your bag last night.'

'Yes, that is it,' he replied, rather sheepishly; 'I believed I had left it on the library table.'

'Your memory certainly wants improving. Wouldn't it be better next time, before you blame me or the servants, to look in the most likely places?'

Once started, this sort of jangling talk went on during the whole of breakfast; after which we had prayers, and then George departed. But not before the two had exchanged some further unamiable remarks. As he drove off in the dog-cart I turned to Christine with my heart in my mouth, and said, 'Oh, how I wish you would break yourself of this habit of nagging at your husband into which you have unfortunately slipped!'

'Oh, you think I nag, do you?' she retorted flippantly; 'Well, granted that I am a sinner in this respect, he is just as bad.'

'No; for he is not the one who generally begins it.'

'Does he not?' she said stormily. 'Nor should he, when it is he who has done the wrong and set the whole thing going. But what am I saying! Kate, I must hold my tongue. Do not think I am angry with you for your reproof. You do not know my provocation; yet in my heart of hearts I am fully aware that even this does not excuse me from my duty as a wife and a Christian, and I am wrong to speak in the way I do to him so constantly.'

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She left me, and when after an hour's absence she returned, I saw once more in her face the subtle charm that used to characterize it, indescribable as the fragrance of a flower.

She was naturally reserved, and I felt convinced that I had better hold my peace, so neither of us reverted to our morning's conversation. In the evening George returned looking half depressed and half sulky, and was just stooping down to kiss the children, who ran eagerly to meet him, when his wife, rising from her chair, went towards him, laid her hand upon his arm and said, in the sweetest of tones, 'George, I am sorry I was so horribly disagreeable to you about that paper this morning. Won't you give me a kiss, or are Chrissie and Frankie to have them all?'

His hand closed sharply over hers, and though he kissed her quietly enough, the sinister look gave way to one of pleasant surprise ; in one moment a reconciliation was effected between these two people, and discord gave place to kindness. To my exceeding joy, peace reigned uninterruptedly during the remainder of my visit, though never once did my brother's name pass their lips.

CHAPTER XX

AN UNSOCIABLE GUEST

ONE cause of uneasiness that had spoiled my stay at Beechfield was thus removed, but there was another of a far more personal nature so far as I was concerned.

One evening, soon after my arrival, Christine brought out her album and began to show me its contents. We had turned over several pages when she remarked, 'Now, this photograph you must especially look at, Kate, for it is Leslie Arnold, a great friend of George's, and a rising barrister in London.'

At the name Leslie Arnold I started, and gazed with staring eyes at the likeness to which she drew my attention. It was the face of the man whom I had prayed never to see again in the world.

In a half-dazed fashion I heard Christine explaining, in a voice that sounded far away, how it was that they knew him. 'My husband and he happened to cross to New York together,' she proceeded. 'They became great friends; so much so, that whenever George is in London he stays with Arnold. He would visit us oftener, only he is so busy. I wish you knew him; he is just the sort you would admire, for he is clever, religious, and given to philanthropic work. By the by, I'll tell you what his clerk Stevenson related of him when last I was in the

City. Some years ago this Stevenson, a wild lad of about fifteen, used to attend an evening school, more from love of mischief than from any desire for self-improvement. One evening he found that the regular superintendent was not on the platform, but in his place stood another gentleman, very tall, dark, and a tremendous swell, who was introduced to the classes by one of the teachers as Mr. Arnold. Stevenson concluded rather too hastily from his appearance that he had a raw hand to deal with—one who would be easily taken in; consequently he was unusually impertinent to his teacher—a young fellow without much force of character—and he made the rest of the boys as unruly as himself.

‘This state of affairs naturally attracted the attention of the temporary superintendent, who forthwith drew near the class and watched its behaviour closely; but as he neither did nor said anything, the lads took his non-interference as a sign of weakness and refused to do any lessons, in spite of the remonstrances of their teacher.

‘The next evening, after Mr. Arnold had opened school, he came straight to the class and said, “Boys, I have been making inquiries of your teacher, and have learned that you refused to do the lessons he set you last night. If you intend to pursue the same course this evening, this school is no place for you, and you had better leave it at once.”

‘Not a boy stirred.

“You do not wish to leave, then? In that case let me tell you plainly I mean lessons to be done. Each one will write a copy and spell these twelve words correctly before he quits this room, even if he has to stay here till to-morrow morning. Now if any lad will not agree

to these conditions, he is free to leave at once, for if he stays, I give him fair warning that he must obey.'

'The class, awed by his words and manner, set to work on their tasks, with the exception of Stevenson. He had made up his mind that he would neither work at his lessons nor turn out of the place at the bidding of the new superintendent, so he just sat doing nothing.

'Arnold soon noticed that he was shirking his work, and, after inquiring his name, told him sternly to learn his words at once.

"Please, sir," he replied, with a sly wink at the other boys, "I'd be glad to do 'em, but I've got an awful headache, and am just mazed like."

"Write your copy then."

"I've had rheumatics that bad all day in my wrist, I couldn't hold a pen and write proper to save my life."

'Nothing more was said ; the superintendent passed on to another class, and Stevenson chuckled over the easy way he had got the better of the stranger.

'The time for closing arrived, and he was just going out when a heavy hand was laid on his shoulder, and he looked round to see Arnold, who said quietly, "You stay behind, Stevenson: I have not done with you. Will one of you lads kindly call at his house and say I am keeping him."

'The boy wriggled and wriggled, and tried hard to get away, but the grasp that held him was like an iron vice, and he had the mortification of seeing all the teachers and scholars depart without him.

'His self-appointed tamer then went to the schoolroom door, locked it, put the key in his pocket and said, "Sit down, my lad, and learn your words."

'The boy answered rudely, "I'm not a-going to larn

'em for you or any other bloke ! I'm blowed if I do, if I stays here all night ! ”

“ In that case I must teach them to you.” And, sitting down opposite to him, he read out in a distinct voice and spelt slowly the first word about forty times, and then proceeded to do the same with the remaining eleven.

‘ Stevenson, caught in a trap, would have stopped his ears or fought his teacher, but he knew he was no match for the man before him. He pretended therefore to fall asleep, but gained nothing by that move, as Arnold made him bathe his face in cold water and walk about the room. He preferred sitting still to doing that, although he detested listening to the monotonous spelling which went on over and over again.

‘ In the early part of the evening he had pretended that his head was “ mazed,” but now it was really becoming so ; and at last, unable to bear the repetition of the now horribly familiar words, he said sulkily, “ I'll say 'em, boss, so that at least I gets peace and quiet.”

‘ His teacher's efforts had not been in vain ; he repeated them correctly, and then Arnold said gravely, “ Write your copy, my boy, and you can then go home.”

‘ Furious at being outwitted over the spelling, he swore savagely he would do no such thing.

“ Well, just as you please. But as I have no wish to starve you, here is some supper.” And he held out a substantial packet of sandwiches.

‘ The lad snatched at it greedily, ate every one up, and when he had finished impudently remarked, “ Guess you'd have been glad of 'em yourself ; you're pretty hungry, ain't you ? Don't you want your own supper by now ? ”

“Write your copy, and I can have it,” answered Mr. Arnold with such a frank, pleasant smile that Stevenson told me it made him feel sort of queer and sorry, and he nearly gave in. Then he thought to himself, “What a kid I’d look! Why, the boys would all make game of me!” And he hardened himself once more.

‘By this time he was terribly drowsy, and his teacher perceiving it told him he might go to sleep for a few hours. He flung himself down on a form near the stove and soon fell fast asleep. When he awoke the fire was out, but the gas was still burning; and he saw Arnold walking quickly up and down the room in his shirt sleeves, looking blue with the cold. “What a precious fool he must be to take off his coat a bitter night like this!” he said to himself; but at that moment his eyes fell on that garment carefully spread over himself.

‘A curious feeling, he said, came over him, such as he had never experienced before, and a lump rose in his throat. Blows and curses he was accustomed to, but not to kindness; and that act went straight to his heart. His teacher had gone coatless as well as supperless for him! Tears sprang unbidden to his eyes; trembling violently he rose from the form and without a word handed Arnold back his coat. Then he sat down and wrote out his copy with the one desire of setting Arnold free.

“Maybe you ain’t ate nothing since breakfast, sir?” said Stevenson, as he handed the paper to his teacher.

“Well, what does it matter? I made a capital meal then,” said Mr. Arnold briskly.

“Anyway, you’ve been cold.” Then he broke down and wept for very shame.

‘Arnold put his arms round the boy’s neck, and as he

comforted him on that cold, dreary morning he won for ever the heart of the reckless lad. I only wish,' Christine concluded, 'that you could have seen the glow on Stevenson's face as he informed me that he owed all the earthly and spiritual good he possessed to Arnold's persistent care and influence.'

Little did Christine imagine what was passing in my mind at that time, but I possessed neither the will nor the courage to confess boldly, 'I met this paragon of yours years ago, and to me he displayed another side of his character—a phase, mean and untrustworthy to the last degree—of which you are evidently in profound ignorance.' No! My lips remained sealed. I had no wish to denounce him, even granting I could have exposed his perfidy without at the same time revealing my own folly. I sat a little longer listening unwillingly to the flattering encomiums bestowed upon him by my friend, then I escaped to my room.

Arrived there, I could not help wondering what I should have done had he taken it into his head to pay his dear friends a visit while I was their guest. The bare idea positively unnerved me; and scarce conscious of what I was doing, I began to drag forth the contents of the wardrobe that I might pack my trunks and flee from Beechfield.

While thus occupied, all at once my hand fell to my side, and the position in which I was placed flashed across me. It was only within the last hour that I had promised George and Christine I would remain with them six weeks longer. I could not truthfully frame any excuse that would justify me in breaking my word and hurrying away in this mad fashion. However, a little reflection soon reassured me. George had remarked on the impossibility of my making Mr. Arnold's

acquaintance during my present visit, as he would be abroad the whole of the vacation. At this thought my fears gradually subsided, and I busied myself hanging my dresses again in the wardrobe, deciding to think no more of the matter. This determination I faithfully adhered to, and the only annoyance I experienced was hearing the man I deemed so unworthy made the frequent subject of eulogium by the Munros.

But my feeling of security soon received a shock. One evening, as I went upstairs to dress for dinner, I heard the dog-cart which daily brought George from the office drive up to the door. That night its arrival was followed by an unusual commotion. Doors were opened and shut, servants ran about, luggage was carried past my bedroom, and then the whole family seemed to come up the staircase, all eagerly talking at once. Amidst the hubbub, to my intense dismay, I distinguished that voice which I had heard in Silcote seven years before. The evil I had so much dreaded had come upon me—Mr. Arnold was verily in the house!

I turned faint and sank on the nearest chair, and as I did so I saw in the looking-glass a ghastly countenance, which I hardly recognized as my own. The sight aroused me. I seized a bottle of smelling-salts and applied them vigorously till the tears ran down my cheeks. Then I rose and dashed cold water over my face. I had no time to lose, for in a quarter of an hour I must see this man, and, cost what it might, I determined that he should not discover the slightest trace of agitation about me. Alas, that I should have to meet him in the presence of the Munros! And how to account for my mysterious silence in relation to him I did not know. With a supreme effort I gathered my scattered

wits together for the coming ordeal. Having completed my toilet with care, I gazed anxiously in the glass to see if my looks would pass muster. To my relief the deadly pallor had departed, and, better still, excitement had lent an unwonted flush to my cheeks. So far so good.

The gong sounded, and I descended the stairs in a state of disciplined calmness which I devoutly hoped would not fail me. In the hall I encountered Christine, who exclaimed admiringly, 'My dear child, how well you look! What a lovely gown! I am glad you have put it on, for, do you know, Leslie Arnold has just arrived, and I am wild with delight to think that after all you and he will meet. He was summoned home on important business, and having finished it sooner than he anticipated he has come down to see us.'

While she was speaking I felt that an unexpected opportunity had presented itself of explaining that I had already met her guest; but while I was picking and choosing the words in which to make my confession, she unconsciously settled the matter by throwing open the drawing-room door—and my chance was gone.

We entered the room, and I saw Mr. Arnold standing in the large bay window, looking tall and imposing by the side of George, who was only of medium height. Seven years had made scarcely any change in him, save that his hair was more scanty at the temples, and that he seemed graver.

He recognized me at once, for he gave a slight start, turned pale, and a steely look shot into his deep-set eyes. However, the next instant Christine had introduced us to each other.

I half held out my hand in recognition of our former acquaintance, but he either did not or would not see it,

and bowing frigidly he turned away to continue his conversation with his host.

This cut direct, though a most ungentlemanly proceeding, was such a piece of unexpected good fortune to me that my spirits rose immediately ; I recognized that it freed me effectually from all embarrassing questions from the Munros, for they could not now possibly imagine that we had met before.

Nevertheless I was staggered by Mr. Arnold's strange behaviour ; after giving it a moment's consideration I concluded that he had acted in this extraordinary fashion because he felt ashamed of the manner in which he had formerly behaved to me.

When we were seated at the dinner-table my good fortune continued, for he behaved exactly as I should have chosen had the choice been given to me, paying me just the ordinary attentions and not a fraction beyond. This lucky escape from the disagreeable explanations I had feared produced in me an unusual buoyancy of spirits, which had the happy effect of setting me completely at my ease. But I noticed that my old acquaintance was quite unable to follow my lead in self-possession ; he answered several of George's remarks at random, whilst he ate scarcely anything.

That dinner did not prove a social success, though it was through no fault of our host and hostess. They did their utmost to promote cheerful conversation, but every topic that was started fell flat, for their new guest merely responded in monosyllables, and as I said as little as possible too, we were all relieved when the meal was over.

Directly Christine and I found ourselves alone, she exclaimed, ' Really, this is very provoking ! I have so longed for you to meet Mr. Arnold. How could any

man behave in the boorish fashion he did when I introduced you? I couldn't have imagined him so stupid as he has been through this long, tiresome meal. Generally he is such good company. Of course he isn't a ladies' man, so that I didn't expect him to gush over you, but I never saw him so taciturn before.'

'Not a ladies' man!' I thought. 'Why, not even Sir Henry Ashton had sought me out so pertinaciously as he did in Silcote.' Truly I seemed fated to know a side of his character with which the Munros were totally unacquainted.

'Do you really imply that there are spots in the sun?' I asked, keeping my countenance, though there must have been a trace of vindictiveness in my tone. 'Isn't your friend the paragon of excellence you believed him to be? I ought to be really disappointed.'

'Well,' she replied, pouting her pretty lips, 'I do admire him, and I am annoyed at the bad impression he has left on your mind.' Just then George entered the room to inform us that Arnold was suffering from a bad headache and that he was taking a little fresh air to put it right. 'I am a bit annoyed with him,' George continued, 'for directly you left us, he began palavering about trespassing on our hospitality, and putting us to inconvenience as we had another visitor. He even suggests leaving us to-morrow. I have told him we have plenty of accommodation, and that we shall feel hurt if he goes for such a trumpery reason. He has consented to stay, but he is a perfect enigma to me.'

'I could solve the puzzle for you,' I thought. Doubtless Mr. Arnold's one desire was to get away from Beechfield without giving offence to his host and hostess. However, I kept my counsel.

In about an hour's time Mr. Arnold returned from his walk ; he assured his friends that his head was much better, and he speedily reinstated himself in the good graces of his hostess by taking a leading part in the conversation. I listened critically to all he said, and was surprised to find that, had I not been aware of his true character, I should have been as much his dupe as when a simple girl of eighteen, for he seemed a high-minded, honourable man. It happened occasionally, in the familiar, easy talk which went on between us, that he and I were compelled to address each other directly, and then, to my great indignation, I became conscious of a subtle, indefinable shade of contempt in his bearing towards me. This made me angry, and caused my thoughts repeatedly to wander from the subject under discussion. But my attention was arrested by Christine saying, 'Excuse me interrupting you, George, but I want to know, Mr. Arnold, how it is you have not brought Fritz with you? Do you not remember the pressing invitation I gave him? Fritz,' she said, turning to me, 'is a frightfully spoiled, but most lovable, fox-terrier of which our friend is the proud possessor. When we were staying at his house he made himself a perfect slave to the dear little thing.'

'I am glad I did,' he answered gloomily, 'for I shall never have the chance again. Some time ago poor Fritz got so fearfully worried by a wretched collie that I had to shoot him. It was a heart-breaking thing to have to do, I assure you. But I wonder what you will think of me when I tell you I have his murderer under my roof. It came about in this way. The collie belonged to a man who lived a few doors from me, and he was such a handsome creature that

I used to notice him a good deal. Fritz was always jealous when I did so, and it is quite possible that he started the quarrel which led to his untimely end. After his death his destroyer naturally avoided me, and not long after his owner left the neighbourhood, taking the collie with him. Two months ago I was returning from my chambers when I met a policeman leading a half-starved, miserable-looking dog by a strap. As I passed them, the animal gave a sharp, pitiful cry of recognition, and strained at his leash to get near me. I stopped, and notwithstanding his wretched condition I recognized him as the brute that had worried Fritz. In spite of this I could not forbear asking the policeman what was to become of him.

“Well, he’s in such a state, sir, I expect he will be destroyed at once,” the man replied.

‘I felt so sorry for the poor animal that I said, “Let me have him. I know the name of his owner, and though he has left town I dare say I shall be able to find out where he is living.”’

“Very good, sir,” he answered, and put the leash into my hand.

‘The collie barked wildly, fawned upon me, licked my hands, and seemed beside himself with joy.’

“There’s no question he knows you, sir. It’s a lucky chance for him he met you, for he’s had a narrow squeak of it,” said the constable.

‘Well, though I have done all in my power to find his master, so far my efforts have been unsuccessful, and the collie has attached himself so much to me that I have not the heart to send him away.’ Then he ended, with a sigh: ‘But I can’t help wondering, as he lies at my feet, what Fritz would think if he saw us.’

It was long past my usual hour for retiring, and as Mr. Arnold finished his story I rose, bade them all good-night, and gladly sought the solitude of my room, hoping to find there a welcome relief from the severe tension I had endured, both of mind and nerves, throughout that long evening.

CHAPTER XXI

THE UNACCOUNTABLE MOODS OF A MAN

WHEN I regained the seclusion of my own room I was disappointed to find that its quiet and solitude did little to restore my composure. In spite of the efforts I made my imagination ran a wild course over the events of the past few hours. I experienced afresh the shock of hearing Mr. Arnold's voice, again I endured the strain of having to meet him, and once more my surprise returned and I felt relieved at the way in which he had ignored our previous acquaintance. Mingling with these recent occurrences came unbidden memories of the days which I had spent in his company at Silcote, as well as a feeling of bitter resentment, provoked by the half-veiled disdain with which he now regarded me. What reason had he, I asked angrily, to treat me thus? I had done him no wrong; my sole fault lay in the fact that I too readily believed in his flattering looks and speeches. I had heard it said that 'the injurer never pardons.' Was it possible that he belonged to that class of men who dislike their dupes because they have revealed themselves to them in their true colours? No; with all my well-grounded distrust of Mr. Arnold, I could not bring myself to place him in the category of such men.

A plausible solution of his strange conduct suggested

itself. Was it not possible, that, considering me a foolish, impressionable creature, he deemed it necessary to keep me at a distance, lest a second time I should fall a victim to his fascinations? The idea of such an explanation, so far from mollifying me, rendered me the more indignant. Then conscience roused herself and said sternly, 'You are a Christian, and must forgive.' But the realization of one's duty and the performance of it are two very different things; how easy to see the right, how infinitely hard to do it! In spite of a clear conception of my duty, wave after wave of resentment surged over me. But I had recently learned a salutary lesson, and I dreaded above all things another lapse into meanness and shame such as I had experienced in relation to Alicia. So I endeavoured to control my feelings.

Ultimately I began to view Mr. Arnold's conduct in a better light, and I recognized the plain fact—however humiliating to my dignity—that he could never have inflicted on me such suffering had I not acted indiscreetly towards him, an absolute stranger. No doubt he had behaved shabbily in taking advantage of my youth and inexperience, but seven years had elapsed since all this had happened. Would it not be better to let the dead past bury its dead? He could not be altogether bad, or the Munros would never think so highly of him, and I had seen with my own eyes how much graver he had become. Was it not charitable to suppose that time had sobered and improved him? It remained, of course, a mystery why he had ignored our previous acquaintance; but evidently he had decided that it was better to conceal the fact from George and Christine, seeing that it did no credit to either of us, and to start afresh. Perhaps I had a right to feel

annoyed at his contemptuous manner, but it would not make him respect me one whit the more if I repaid his disdain with petulance. No ; the wisest course I could adopt would be to treat him with quiet courtesy, and let him see that the credulous, forward girl he had known in the past had become a prudent and sensible woman. Satisfied with such a determination, I laid my head on the pillow and soon fell fast asleep.

When I encountered Mr. Arnold next morning I was relieved to find that, though he treated me with reserve, there was nothing in his manner to attract the attention of our host or hostess. But I discovered, much to my sorrow, that the battle with my foolish resentment had to be fought all over again whenever he plainly showed how low I stood in his estimation. I had to resort times and again to my unfailing weapon of prayer in order to drive back my angry thoughts and preserve a tranquil demeanour.

One evening I was sitting in the drawing-room with little Frankie as my companion. He had pleaded with nurse to allow him to sit up a tiny bit longer, and she had yielded ; but hardly had she left the room when Mr. Arnold entered. He was on the point of retreating as soon as he perceived me, but my companion, catching sight of him, called out, ' 'Ou mustn't go ; me does want to see the little wheels go wound.'

'Very well,' he replied ; and, coming forward, he lifted the little fellow on to his knee and showed him the inside of his watch, as I suppose he had frequently done before. The allotted time having expired, I said, 'Now, Frankie, say good-night ; it is time to go. We must keep our promise to nurse.'

'I'se got to say my pwayers, I has, 'fore I goes to bed ; and I'se going to say them to my Unkie Leslie.'

'All right, my boy,' he replied gently ; whereupon the child put his hands together and repeated, in childish accents, 'Our Father' and 'Gentle Jesus,' and finished in a swift gabble, 'B'ess fadder, mudder, Kissie, baby, nurse, and everybody, and make me a good boy.' He then put his arms round Mr. Arnold's neck and hugged him tightly, to the detriment of his tie and shirt-front, exclaiming, 'Me does love 'ou, wery, wery much!' Then he turned to me inquiringly, 'Does 'ou love my Unkie Leslie too?'

I was so taken aback at the sudden question that I remained for the moment speechless. Before I could reply, however, Mr. Arnold answered, without the slightest hesitation, 'What a silly question, Frankie! When you are older you will know that Miss Leigh professes to be a good Christian, and good Christians love everybody.'

'Is 'ou everybody?' persisted this *enfant terrible*.

'Such is not my good fortune,' he replied with a smile.

'Frankie, you really must come to bed immediately,' I said abruptly.

Mr. Arnold rose from his chair and placed him in my arms. As he did so he caught sight of his crumpled condition in the mirror, and exclaimed, 'You young rascal! What a fearful mess you have made of me!' Then, waiting only to hold the door for us to pass out, he bolted upstairs three steps at a time to make himself respectable for dinner, leaving me somewhat chagrined.

During dinner, as well as afterwards, when we were all sitting in the drawing-room, I felt so embarrassed in his company that I was quite pleased when George begged me to give them some music.

I sat down at the piano and played in the informal fashion they liked best ; sometimes one or other would

ask for a special piece or song, but more often they left the choice to me.

Mr. Arnold, who was passionately fond of music, became gradually so absorbed that unconsciously he drew his chair nearer and nearer to the piano. I had played for some time when George petitioned for a favourite song of his called 'Keeping Tryst,' the first words of which ran as follows :

A gentle, fair-haired maiden
 Stood at the trysting-stile ;
 Her face, at first beclouded,
 Soon broke into a smile.
 'Ah ! there he comes,' she murmured,
 'Swift up the village street ;
 We are such faithful lovers,
 We never fail to meet.'

I had just finished singing this verse when, raising my eyes, I encountered Mr. Arnold's fixed upon me indignantly. Next instant he got up abruptly from his chair, crossed over to where George was sitting, and, muttering something in a low voice, left the room. Then it struck me what had made him so angry : he believed that I had sung these words with the set purpose of bringing up the past.

It was with great difficulty I managed to finish the song, but fortunately the Munros were engaged in discussing his sudden departure and never noticed that anything was amiss with me.

'He must be out of sorts,' I heard George say.

'I agree with you,' observed Christine ; 'but what it is I can't imagine.'

Mr. Arnold did his utmost to keep them in the dark by being as studiously polite to me as I was to him ; although, after this evening's unpleasant experience, both of us kept still more aloof.

One morning we all sat over breakfast much longer than usual. Just before we rose from the table the conversation turned on a case of alleged neglect on the part of two lady-nurses in one of the great London hospitals. George sided with the nurses, but Mr. Arnold, who seemed in a carping mood that morning, condemned them. Not content with this, he attacked nurses as a body, saying, 'Many of these young ladies go to be trained merely because they dislike the restraints of home; it is just another form of dissipation.'

'Well, all I can say is this,' remarked Christine, 'that relieving suffering is a very good form of dissipation; and as I don't think you take a right view of the matter, I must tell you about a lady-nurse whom I knew well. This girl could not be spared entirely from home, so she went for two or three hours daily to a cottage hospital, and in time gained a thorough knowledge of her profession. A serious epidemic of scarlet fever broke out in the poorer part of the town in which she lived, and as there was a scarcity of helpers she left her comfortable home and went and lived among these sufferers, nursing them night and day until her health broke down entirely. Now, Leslie, what have you to say in her dispraise?'

I broke into a cold perspiration as Christine delivered herself of this highly coloured narrative.

Mr. Arnold replied enthusiastically, 'Oh! if all lady-nurses were like that girl, I should become their fervent admirer.'

I interposed disdainfully: 'I never heard anything more ridiculous than making so much fuss about a woman who did so little. Hundreds of paid nurses, accepting payment only because they cannot afford to give their services, devote their whole lives—and not

merely a few weeks—to this arduous occupation without exciting the smallest admiration. I know for a fact that this girl Mrs. Munro has been speaking of lodged in comfortable rooms, and generally slept six or seven hours out of the twenty-four.'

Mr. Arnold fidgeted in his chair while I was speaking, and when I had finished he said impatiently, 'I cannot imagine, Miss Leigh, what motive you can have in detracting from the heroic conduct of this young lady.'

'Heroic!' I retorted scornfully; 'she merely did her duty.' And, vexed beyond measure, I rose from the breakfast-table.

Christine caught hold of my gown as I passed and said, with a mischievous laugh, 'Really, Leslie, I cannot compliment you on your penetration! When my dear friend and I were little girls at school, this very proper and modest sentiment was instilled into our minds, and duly inscribed in our copy-books: "Self-praise is no recommendation." Miss Leigh has just proved that this seed has fallen upon good ground!'

George now interposed, for he saw I was hurt, and said, 'Let her go, dear; you have teased her quite enough.'

At last Mr. Arnold understood, and ere I reached the door he stopped me and said gently, 'Miss Leigh, please excuse my stupidity. I have only this moment identified that lady. Yes, in spite of all your strictures,' he added, looking me full in the face, 'I shall still continue to regard her as such.'

Christine little suspected the humiliation she had inflicted on me when she compelled Mr. Arnold to praise me so unwittingly. All I hoped was that he would now realize that I had other interests in life besides flirtation.

CHAPTER XXII

FURTHER CHANGES

THAT afternoon, Christine and I had just finished tea when George, who had returned earlier than usual from the office, came into the room with a pamphlet in his hand and said, 'Kate, I have brought you a copy of that *Ancient and Modern Athletics* which Leslie and I were discussing the other evening, and which you said you would like to see. Would you mind looking over it at once? I have promised to take it back to the library to-morrow, and as some people are coming to dinner, this will be your only opportunity.'

I thanked him, and, taking the pamphlet, I settled down comfortably on the window-seat at the far end of the room and began reading it. While I was thus engaged Mr. Arnold entered, and at his host's invitation joined him in a cup of afternoon tea. The three friends chatted together, but so engrossed was I with my reading that I scarcely heeded their conversation until my attention was arrested by the emphatic remark from George: 'Well, the long and short of it is, old fellow, what you want is a good wife; she would soon put matters straight for you!'

'Thanks! I prefer to stay as I am; the remedy you propose is worse than the disease.'

'George,' interposed his wife, 'I think you are making

a great mistake in urging our friend to turn Benedict. To change an ideal bachelor into an indifferent husband would prove a very doubtful benefit both to himself and to his unfortunate wife.'

Mr. Arnold laughed heartily and exclaimed, 'Well, I never suspected till this moment that I was in your bad books, Mrs. Munro. Pray, why is my wife, if ever such a person appears upon the scene, to be dubbed "unfortunate?" Do you think I shall turn out a second Bluebeard?'

'No, hardly that. Still, hearts do get broken through neglect; and you seem so self-contained, so wrapped up in your professional and philanthropic work, that I cannot see what time is left for you to give your wife. To me it appears highly improbable that you will fall head over ears in love, which is about the only thing that could really revolutionize your life.'

'I cannot picture you mooning about in the Romeo style!' observed George, smiling at his friend.

'Believe me, I can be foolishly romantic,' said Arnold soberly.

'Hear, hear!' cried George derisively. 'You foolishly romantic! That is good, and no mistake.'

'Mrs. Munro, I am going to let your husband severely alone; but I venture to think I could give you a different impression.'

'Could you?' queried Christine, in so dubious a tone that both men laughed outright.

'Well, then, in order to confound you two unbelievers for ever, I will give you a leaf out of my past experience, on condition that you never banter me on the subject again.' I think his manner rather sobered them; anyhow, he proceeded without further interruption. 'Some years ago I met a maiden whose face and expression

seemed full of sweetness and purity beyond description. I neither knew nor cared whether others thought her beautiful. To my dazzled eyes she appeared the fairest mortal in the world, and when I came to know her, her heart, intellect, and life seemed as winsome as her looks. Is it a wonder then that I straightway fell in love with her? Indeed, I loved her so intensely, so absolutely, that although I have striven my utmost to banish her from my heart it has proved but a miserable failure. I have tried once or twice to interest myself in other women, but all in vain. When I have thought I was making progress, suddenly the face of my old love would rise before me. Hence my bachelorhood. But enough of this.'

'Why didn't you marry her?' asked George bluntly.

'For the best of all reasons: she loved some one else. Besides, I found out that my idol was by no means so perfect as I had imagined. That is why I am so angered with myself for not being able to break my chains.'

There was a bitter ring in his voice, and apparently the expression of his feelings made him restless, for he rose abruptly from his chair and strode straight to the window, where I sat buried in the cushions, with my book lying unheeded on my knee.

As he caught sight of me he gave a tremendous start, coloured up to the roots of his hair, and looked more discomposed than I had ever seen a man, while he stammered forth, in a painfully confused voice, something about 'an unexpected auditor.'

Now I had no desire that he should think the tale of his unfortunate love affair had affected me in the least, so I remarked coolly, 'I am indeed sorry, Mr. Arnold, that you did not know I was present; but I

took for granted you could see me sitting here. However, I shall not betray confidences.' Anxious to change the subject, I continued quickly, 'May I ask you to do me a favour? Learned folk are so unkind, they never will write for the unlearned; and here in this pamphlet are several Greek quotations. Please take pity on my ignorance and tell me what they mean.'

While I was speaking he stood gazing at me in a bewildered sort of way, and when I ended he shot at me a strange and scrutinizing glance, as if he would read my very soul. Discovering, apparently, that I bore him no malice, and was completely at my ease, he gradually recovered himself, and taking his seat by my side, he translated the passages I pointed out.

When he had finished he began criticizing the article itself, and we were still deep in the discussion when Christine came towards us exclaiming, 'I wonder whether you two people are aware what time it is? George and I have just discovered that if we are to be ready to receive our guests we must go and dress immediately. May I suggest that you follow our example?'

This was a welcome diversion to me, for I wanted time to collect my thoughts. I had managed to present a brave front to this man, and even to engage in ordinary conversation with him, yet my pride had received a severe shock. I now felt certain I had merely been one of the subjects of his experiments, and this thought cut me to the quick. Of course this accounted fully for his conduct. Doubtless he had tried to love me, had failed, and then had fled away in disgust. Christina Rossetti's lines came to my mind:

A DOUBLE CONQUEST

You took my heart in your hand
With a friendly smile ;
With a critical eye you scanned,
Then set it down . . .
As you set it down, it broke . . .
My hope was written on sand.

He had caused me terrible suffering, but the embarrassment he had displayed when he discovered that I had overheard his confidences to the Munros mitigated this somewhat. Then I could not help acknowledging that he was a man capable of deep and lasting feeling, and the thought of his bitter regret roused my pity and inclined me toward forgiveness. He was suffering from a wound that was still aching, whilst mine had healed long ago.

When I re-entered the drawing-room I found that all the guests had arrived. I congratulated myself that it was so large a company, as there would be the less necessity for Mr. Arnold and myself to come into contact with each other during the evening. But, much to my chagrin, he seemed to be thrown largely into my company, and he amazed me somewhat by insisting on turning over the pages of my music.

My astonishment, however, subsided when I reflected that he was perfectly consistent in acting thus. He dreaded my susceptibility ; but now that I had heard of his love for another woman that dread was doubtless removed, and he felt at liberty to become his natural self again. On the whole I was content, inasmuch as it rendered our intercourse much more easy, if not exactly pleasant.

I was destined to be thrown more into his company than I had hitherto been, for next morning, when prayers were over and George inquired as usual whether he

were ready to accompany him to town, he replied carelessly, 'No, thanks, I will not go to-day. If Mrs. Munro has no objection I intend to be thoroughly lazy and just knock about the place, or sit and read. I promise not to disturb anybody.'

'Oh, you will not disturb us in the least,' replied his hostess graciously. 'Stay at home by all means; we shall be delighted to have you. The library is quite at your disposal.'

'Surely you need not banish me to the library! You do not know what it is for an "ideal bachelor" to see a little domestic life, and I can read as easily in company as in solitude.'

'All I wish,' she replied, 'is that you should make yourself perfectly at home, and do exactly what you like.'

'And I promise,' said her husband, as he was about to quit the room, 'not to leave you too long to the tender mercies of the ladies. I'll come back early this afternoon and have a game of bowls with you.'

'Pray, Munro, don't put yourself to any inconvenience on my account; I am quite able to amuse myself,' Mr. Arnold replied, as his friend departed.

It was a custom at Beechfield, and one I much appreciated, that after breakfast was cleared away the children should come down for an hour or two; and nurse, as usual, soon made her appearance with the three bairns.

I at once seized upon the baby, a jolly little fellow, whilst Christine brought out a large box of bricks and divided them between the two older ones. As soon as she received her share, Chrissie announced: 'I am going to build all by myself, a tall, tall house. It will take me a long time to build; it is going to be as tall as you, mummy, dear.'

Meanwhile, Mr. Arnold, true to his promise, sat reading his book, apparently taking no notice of anything that went on around him.

The children had played happily for some time when a maid came in to tell her mistress that a Mrs. Hardy particularly wanted to see her. Christine went off to the hall, but in about ten minutes returned, dressed for walking, and said, 'Kate, I am so sorry, I must go at once with this Mrs. Hardy. I don't know whether you have noticed her at chapel—she sits near us. Her husband is dangerously ill, and has asked to see me. Now, would you not rather I rang for nurse to fetch the children? Frankie, nurse says, has been rather cross, and she thinks he is not quite well, so it is possible you may find him troublesome.'

'No, don't ring. You know I love having them, and I expect he will get on all right. At any rate, as a last resource, I can ring for nurse myself.'

'Very well,' she replied, and started off on her errand of mercy.

She had scarcely left the room a second when the young man said tearfully, 'I wants my muvver, I does.'

I managed to pacify him, but in a few minutes he again burst out crying.

'Now, what is the matter?' I inquired.

'Kissie has taked my bricks, and my big arch, and putted it into her house,' he wailed.

'I've not got his bricks or his big arch; I've only got my very own,' retorted his sister.

After great clamouring on his part, and a strict search on mine, I found the arch he thought his sister had purloined, and presented it to him. Still unconsoled, he sobbed out, 'I wants my own, I do; dis uvver is Kissie's and she's took mine.'

‘Frankie!’ I said severely, ‘you are really a spoilt little boy ; this one is yours,’ and I placed it in his hand.

He threw it down peevishly, crying, ‘I’se not spoilt, I’se tired, and I wants to sit on ’our knee, and Kissie can have the arch.’

‘But, my dear boy, I cannot do with you on my knee as well as baby. Fetch that nice little stool and come and sit by my side.’

‘And I shall sit on the other stool my own self by you too,’ exclaimed Chrissie, leaving the tall house to its fate.

I gave each of the children a picture-book to look at ; but Frankie, generally the sweetest tempered little fellow, now snatched his sister’s book out of her hand and said crossly, ‘Mine’s a nasty ole book, Kissie can have it.’ Whereupon she seized hers again, and received a smack from her brother as she did so.

‘Frankie,’ I said, ‘if you strike your sister again, you will go to the nursery!’

‘But I s’all do it,’ replied Master Frank.

‘Then I shall ring for nurse.’

Mr. Arnold now laid down his book, came forward and said, ‘You seem to have your hands full, Miss Leigh ; can I be of any assistance? Frank, come and sit on my knee, and I will tell you a story all about lions and tigers!’

‘Me doesn’t want ’tory, me wishes to ’tay wiv auntie.’

‘Then really,’ he said, looking down at me with an amused smile, ‘I don’t see exactly how I can help you ; I dare not tackle the baby. Just at this moment I grant he looks placidity itself, but babies are treacherous cattle, and if he found himself in the arms of a stranger I suppose he would set up such a scream that would

bring devoted nurse and tender-hearted domestics flocking hither in a crowd.'

I laughed at this tragic picture ; then as I glanced at him I startled myself by thinking, 'Whatever has happened ? This is the very man I knew at Silcote, full of fun and buoyant energy ; not one bit like the stiff, ungenial creature he has been since he came to Beechfield.' No time, however, was allowed me to ponder this idea, for Frankie, putting a soft little hand on my cheek to attract my attention, said beseechingly, 'Will 'ou p'ease d'aw me an 'ittle duck ?'

In the pride of my heart I willingly consented. I had often drawn animals and birds, which had hitherto amply satisfied the children I had met, and I soon produced in outline what I considered a creditable looking bird.

He gazed at it mournfully and said, 'I wants a nice 'ittle duck, I do.'

'Well, this one is nice ; look at its broad bill, and its spreading feet.'

'De pore t'ing got no fevvers to keep 'im warm.'

He was right, it certainly was deficient in that respect ; but as drawing feathers was beyond my limited powers I did not see how this defect was to be remedied.

Chrissie came round to look at it, and said solemnly, 'It is like father's ducks, mother makes real ones.'

Then I remembered Christine's artistic abilities, and my heart sank within me ; but to my surprise, Frankie seized on the drawing and, radiant again, cried out, 'Favver's duck ! Me will love 'ou !' And pressing the unfeathered little biped to his lips he whispered softly, 'Dear 'ittle favver's duckie !'

Chrissie, her brother's wants having been thus success-

fully met, now turned to Mr. Arnold with the request, 'Please draw me a pussie-cat like mine in the kitchen.'

'I am afraid I am not a good hand at drawing pussies,' he replied, 'but I'll do my best'; and sitting down he drew slowly and carefully a fine cat, all bewhiskered, which I surely thought would content the child. But, no! she regarded it with even less favour than my attempt had received from her brother, and remarked, in a tone of sorrowful wonder, 'I did think a big man like you could make a better pussie; I should cry if my pussy had legs like that!'

'Alas!' said Mr. Arnold, looking at me pathetically, 'every moment we are sinking lower in the opinion of these young people; it must have been my evil genius that prompted me to draw a cat standing instead of one lying down.'

'I must redeem my character somehow,' he mused. Then turning to the critical little maid he said, 'Chrissie, you say that I am a big man. Shall I build you a big tower, taller than I am?'

'Yes, do!' she exclaimed joyfully; so he betook himself at once to a task from which he anticipated more hopeful results.

Frankie contentedly watched the progress of the tower, still holding his duck and 'loving' it, as he called it, now and again. Meanwhile the baby fell fast asleep with his head on my shoulder, and half an hour later, when their mother returned, a very tranquil scene presented itself to her view. But for one moment only. Her entrance, like the kiss bestowed by the prince on the sleeping beauty in the wood, disturbed everything, for Chrissie, springing forward to meet her, in her haste caught the corner of the nearly completed tower, which fell straightway with a tremendous crash, fortunately on

the side farthest from us. The noise startled the poor baby who woke and screamed loudly, whilst a pair of boyish lungs shouted lustily, 'Muvver's tum back addain !'

'Chrissie, you are a careless little girl !' said her mother, taking the baby in her arms to quiet him.

But here Mr. Arnold interposed. 'Excuse me, Mrs. Munro, but the one to be scolded is myself; I am to blame for making such a pile.'

At this moment a hurried knock was heard, the door was thrown open, and nurse appeared, greatly agitated. Behind her stood Betsy the under-nurse, equally agitated, and two other maids. Beholding her mistress, nurse was taken aback and exclaimed, 'Lor, ma'am ! I didn't know as you was in the house.'

'Well, what is the matter, nurse ?'

'Please, ma'am, one of the girls a minute ago ran to tell me, all frightened like, she had heard a dreadful noise in here, and baby was screaming dreadful; so I rushed down to see whatever had happened to the precious lamb !'

'Fortunately nothing has happened to baby,' replied her mistress calmly, 'but you can take him upstairs now. Betsy, clear up the bricks; Chrissie, you had better help.'

Mr. Arnold now collected his books and papers, and as he retreated from the room he said to me, in a low tone of voice, 'Was I not a true prophet? I am indeed delighted that Mrs. Munro was here to face them all.'

CHAPTER XXIII

THE BLUE OF HEAVEN AGAIN

IN the afternoon George came home early, as he had promised, for the game of bowls. It was now late in September, but the day was bright and sunny without a suspicion of a breeze, and there was just that touch of sharpness in the air that rendered it exhilarating. In truth, so inviting was it out of doors that Christine and I were easily persuaded to join the men in their game, they assuring us that they much preferred doubles to singles. We enjoyed the diversion thoroughly, and played as long as the daylight lasted.

‘Let us have another game to-morrow,’ said George, as we were returning to the house.

‘I am sorry I shall not be able to join you,’ observed his wife, ‘as I have a committee meeting in town at two o’clock.’

‘In that case,’ said Mr. Arnold, ‘I will look up a college friend whom I promised to call on when in these parts.’

‘All right,’ said George, ‘and I have plenty of work to do at the office.’

The following morning, therefore, Mr. Arnold accompanied George to town, whilst Christine and I drove in some hours later. As she had arranged to call at her dressmaker’s before she went to the committee meeting,

the carriage left her there, the coachman receiving orders to call again for his mistress in half an hour. I then drove on to King Street, where most of the best shops in Corrington were. Having completed my purchases, I was just stepping into the carriage when a hand was laid on my arm, and turning round I came face to face with an old acquaintance, a Mrs. Greenhall, the widow of a saddler who used to live in Charnham, and who had been very kind to my brother and myself when we were children.

‘Oh, Miss Kate!’ she exclaimed; ‘please forgive the liberty I have taken, but I never thought of seeing a face I knew in this part of the world. Susie,’ she said, speaking to a tall good-looking girl who stood by her side, ‘this is Miss Leigh whom you have often heard me talk about.’ Then, without a break, she went on: ‘And, Miss Kate—for really I can’t frame my tongue to call you anything else—this is Susie—brother Tom’s daughter. He has moved from his old farm and taken one nine miles or so out of Corrington, and me and her has come in for the day to have a look at the shops, and see all we can of what’s a-goin’ on. But, dearie, what in the name of goodness have you done with all your pretty colour and bonny looks? Why, you ain’t a patch on what you were when I took tea with you Michaelmas twelvemonth. You’ve gone all thin and like, though you haven’t lost that sweet innocent look you’ve had ever since I first set eyes on you. And Master Charlie too, I mind him well, a perfect beauty! Just for all the world like a picture, with them mass of curls glintin’ like gold in the sunlight and eyes as blue as a summer sky! How’s he now? I did hear as he’d been laid up, and gone to furrin parts for a change.’

‘Thank you, he is much better,’ I replied, glad at last

to have chance of speaking, after which I ventured to invite her and her niece to spend the afternoon with me and see what we could of the sights of the town. She had been, as I have said, very kind to me in the past; and, loquacious as she was, my heart absolutely rejoiced to hear my brother's name freely mentioned after the mysterious interdict under which it had been at Beechfield.

'Well!' she cried excitedly, 'it's real kind of you to ask us, and it will be a treat to me, and no mistake, to have your company.'

Forthwith I dismissed the coachman, and told him to let his mistress know that I should not be back at Beechfield till between five and six o'clock. Then I proposed to my companions that we should commence by lunching at Ford's, where I had been several times with Christine. My suggestion seemed to give extraordinary pleasure to Mrs. Greenhall, who exclaimed, 'To think now that you should have gone and pitched on Ford's, of all places. Why, Susie and me has arranged to meet a friend and admirer of hers there. Such a nice young gentleman, though there's nothing settled between 'em yet! He's a traveller for a large firm here, ain't he, child?'

'Yes,' she replied, blushing deeply, 'and he's been with Burton & Willett, builders' merchants, so long that I don't think they could get on without him.'

I was much taken aback at the addition of this gentleman to our party, but it was too late to withdraw my invitation, so we made our way in the direction of Ford's. Mrs. Greenhall lost no time in inquiring as to where I was staying in Corrington.

When I mentioned Mr. and Mrs. George Munro, her tongue ran on. 'Why, of course! I've known George

ever since he was a baby in long clothes. My William and I were always pretty thick with Farmer Munro, and that poor wife of his who, I'll be bound, dursen't call her soul her own. He allus was a queer stick, and is so still; for when I saw him last and asked after the lad, he looked for all the world as if he'd had a bite out of a crab-apple, so sour like, instead of being proud of his son having done so well. Brother Tom tells me he is quite a rich gentleman now, and does a power of good in the neighbourhood. And to think of his wife being "the pretty little French lady" as my William always called her. A lovely face she had, to be sure, and stepped as dainty as a princess. I thought at one time she and Master Charlie would make a match of it, for at chapel—and more's the shame of me to have taken notice of such things—he could hardly keep his eyes off her. Him and she was to be seen constant together. But about that time my poor husband took ill and died; and I left Charnham before that fine madam at that grand hall—for the life of me I can't remember her name—But, bless me! here we are, I suppose, at Ford's, for there's that young gentleman I told you of awaitin' for us.'

As she spoke a short and stout individual, showily dressed, with dark hair, florid complexion, and with a gaudy flower in his button-hole, hurried forward and said affectedly, 'Well, how do, ladies? Better late than never! I've been cooling my heels here a good quarter of an hour by my watch. But it's the correct thing for gents to wait for the fair sex, eh, ma'am? And pray how is Miss Susie here? Though I need hardly waste breath asking such a question, for she's blooming as ever, I see!'

'Well, Mr. Spinks,' replied Mrs. Greenhall apolo-

getically, 'we are a bit late; I had the luck to happen on this young lady, Miss Leigh, who I knew when I lived in Charnham, and that kept me a trifle longer.'

She then introduced him to me, and before I could prevent him he had seized my hand in the freest manner, while he exclaimed, 'I guess I'm in luck too, like our friend here, and no mistake! I'm proud to make your acquaintance, miss! But, ladies, we had better hurry up and get something to eat. Now, what do you say to chops and tomato sauce, or would you prefer chicken, or roast meat, and then something sweet to end up with?'

'Oh, anything you order will suit well enough,' replied Mrs. Greenhall; but at this point I interfered decidedly.

"I will order lunch, if you will be kind enough, Mr. Spinks, to go into the dining-room and secure a table for us.'

He stared at me in astonishment, but made no audible objection, and after a moment's hesitation he did as I requested. I chose from the menu what I thought they would most enjoy, and paid beforehand, so as to avoid any discussion on the subject with this man.

As I entered the dining-room Mr. Spinks called out, in a loud voice, 'Here we are, miss; all as right as a trivet!'

A gentleman who was seated at the next table reading the newspaper raised his head. To my confusion I saw it was Mr. Arnold, who bowed, not without a trace of surprise in his look as he saw my companions.

While we waited for luncheon to be served, Mr. Spinks completed my disgust with him by neglecting poor Susie and devoting his attention to me. He paid

me extravagant compliments, and altogether was so impertinent that I was at my wits' end what to do. My first impulse was to snub him, but I resisted this, for I remembered that I had voluntarily adopted the part of hostess. Furthermore, in hurting him I might grieve his friends, which I had no desire to do. Hampered by these considerations, I found him quite beyond my limited resources.

From his immediate proximity to our table, Mr. Arnold must have heard the arrant nonsense I had to endure from the blatant Spinks, for eventually he rose from his seat and politely asked if I would allow him to join my party. I scarcely knew whether to feel pleased or otherwise at his request, but I assented. What else was to be done?

He drew his chair forward, and placing himself between me and my disagreeable admirer, begged me to introduce him to my friends. Whereupon Mr. Spinks remarked, 'Appy to meet you, sir; I don't know where I've set eyes on you before, but your face is somehow familiar to me. I've bin on the road a goodish number of years, yet I hardly think we are in the same line of business?'

'No; I am a lawyer,' Mr. Arnold replied quietly.

'Ah! now I know where I have seen you—up London way, to be sure. I ain't one of your fly-away chaps, and of an evening I often go to lectures and that kind of thing, and in one of them big halls I've heard you speak twice. Your first lecture was, I recollect, on Oliver Cromwell, and your second on the Better Housing of the Working Class; and ripping good, up-to-date lectures they were. I'm proud and 'appy to meet you, sir, off the platform in private life.'

How long this happiness lasted I cannot say, for

from that instant his star set, and his light was quenched as far as I was concerned. Scarcely another opportunity was afforded him of exchanging a word with me during the remainder of the meal. Mr. Arnold, with a volubility that exceeded even that of Mrs. Greenhall—who sat shy and tongue-tied in his presence—and such as certainly had not distinguished him before, managed to engross the whole of the conversation; and if poor Spinks attempted to edge in a word he merely replied politely, ‘Just so,’ or ‘Excuse me,’ and off he set again. Corrington was the one topic he selected to discourse upon, and I learned more in a few minutes about its trade, docks, buildings, and population than I had done all the time I had been at Beechfield.

The moment he finished speaking, Mr. Spinks seized the opportunity to say, in a solicitous tone, ‘My dear miss, you are eating nothing! You have not even the appetite of a bird. Won’t you let me order some little dainty or other that you could fancy?’

‘No, thanks,’ I replied, ‘I have all I need.’ Before he could return to the attack Mr. Arnold bent over the table, separating me entirely from him, and once more commenced to pour forth a stream of useful information until luncheon came to an end. He then asked for the bill, after glancing over which he said hastily, ‘This is not right; I want the account for all this table.’

‘Yes, sir,’ replied the waiter, ‘it is quite right; the lady there’—looking at me—‘has settled for the party.’

‘Oh, my dear miss,’ exclaimed Mr. Spinks, ‘this is unkind of you! Why, this gent and I would gladly have stood treat. Ladies’ company is always worth paying for, ain’t it, sir?’ turning with a simpering smile

to Mr. Arnold. The latter bowed coldly, and then carried him off to secure an open carriage, from which we might see the sights of Corrington in comfort.

Mr. Arnold handed the three of us into the carriage, and then jumped in himself, leaving Mr. Spinks no choice but to take his seat by the coachman.

It is scarcely necessary to enumerate the sights we saw and the places we visited; sufficient to say, we started our sightseeing at the docks with its multitude of steamers, and wound up by visiting the exhibition of pictures held annually under the patronage of the Corrington Corporation. As I was looking at the paintings in the large saloon, for the first time that afternoon by some unlucky chance I became separated from Mr. Arnold. In a trice Mr. Spinks was at my side, saying, in a hoarse, audible whisper, 'My dear miss, any one can see with half an eye how matters stand between you and that gent. Martin Spinks is the last chap to poach on other people's preserves; but all the same he thinks him a tremendously lucky fellow, and wishes he stood in his shoes.'

Mr. Arnold reappeared at this moment, and I had the disagreeable feeling that he must have heard nearly every word Spinks had uttered. But, apparently unmoved, he remarked, in a casual way, 'Miss Leigh, there is a painting on the other side of the room worth seeing; may I ask you to come and have a look at it?'

As we walked towards it I devoutly hoped he did not notice my burning cheeks and the discomposure I felt at Mr. Spinks' allusions. When we had examined the picture, he said, 'Do you know, Miss Leigh, the gallery closes at five o'clock, and it only wants a few minutes to that hour. Is there any other place you

would like your friends to visit, or would you rather return to Beechfield ?'

'Oh, I would much rather go home now. Mrs. Munro will be expecting me ; I will go and tell Mrs. Greenhall.' So I crossed to where she was standing by her niece.

Mrs. Greenhall drew me out of earshot of Susie, and said quietly, 'I thank you so much, dearie, for having given an old woman like myself such a treat to-day ; and proud and grateful I am to you and your friend for your kindness to us.' Then, lowering her voice to a confidential whisper : 'I am so glad to have seen him—tall enough and grand enough for a prince, and yet he ain't a bit haughty-like, but just a frank, pleasant-spoken gentleman. And real good too, as no one can doubt who saw his face. Bless me, what a splendid talker he is, to be sure ! Wonderfully clever—too clever for my poor head to take in 'half he said ! And now I'll be looking out for news of you and him in the papers ; and may you be as happy as the days are long, and an old woman's blessing go with you both !'

'Dear Mrs. Greenhall,' I interjected hurriedly, 'you are indeed mistaken in imagining there is anything between Mr. Arnold and myself.' She only smiled incredulously, and at that moment Mr. Arnold approached. In great trepidation I waited to hear whether she would make a similar allusion to him about our supposed relations, but fortunately I was spared this infliction, though what she added to her thanks to him was trying enough : 'Maybe you'll forgive me—an old woman, sir—but I'd like to put in a word of warning. I wish you would see Miss Katie gets rid of that nasty cough she has. Unless she takes more care of herself she'll go to her grave afore her time, which would be a dreadful pity.'

'I quite agree with you, Mrs. Greenhall,' he returned gravely; 'I wish with all my heart Miss Leigh could be induced to do what you advise.'

To put an end to all this personal talk, I hastily shook hands with Susie, and even with the offending Mr. Spinks, and hurried down the broad staircase, attended by Mr. Arnold and my friends, who thanked us over and over again for the happy time we had given them; after which they stood watching us drive away from the top of the steps, the irrepressible Mr. Spinks, true to his character to the last, waving a bright-coloured handkerchief until we were out of sight.

It was a great comfort, in the mood I was in, to find that when we were by ourselves my self-constituted guardian's powers of conversation entirely deserted him. It may be that I ought to have been grateful to him for giving up his visit to his friend in order to shield me from the unwelcome attentions of the vulgar Spinks, for the courtesy he had shown my friends, and for the trouble he had taken to enable them to see everything of interest to them. In truth, however, I was disgusted at being placed under obligations to him. Of one sort of obligation I was determined to rid myself at any rate. I knew that he must have spent a good deal of money that afternoon, so drawing out my purse I said, 'I am much obliged to you, Mr. Arnold, for saving me the trouble of paying the various expenses of our outing. Will you kindly tell me how much I am indebted to you?'

'Oh,' he replied, with an amused look in his eyes, 'you want a bill, each item marked in plain figures, as the shops say? Now, I am a lazy man, and it will take a deal of calculation; in which circumstances I throw myself on your generosity to let me off.'

‘What an excuse! I am sure you can easily make a guess at the amount I owe you. It is only natural that I should wish to pay my friends’ expenses and my own.’

‘You would have preferred being indebted to Mr. Spinks?’ he queried.

‘No, certainly not; he could not have afforded it. Besides, as a matter of course, he would have allowed me to pay.’

‘Miss Leigh,’ he replied, ‘will you recognize two facts: that in the first place I am not Mr. Spinks, and can afford it; and secondly, that if you try till doomsday you will never succeed in forcing me to receive the trifling sum I spent during our enjoyable afternoon. I took an unwarrantable liberty in asking to join your party, and the only way you can show that you really forgive me is by not saying any more on the subject. I beg this as a personal favour.’

I could not in common politeness press the matter any further, but I took some kind of a revenge by thanking him at great length for his kindness and liberality; and while I prosed on, I had the satisfaction of seeing him look more and more disconcerted until, unable any longer to endure my thanks, he broke out: ‘Pardon me for interrupting you. All the thanks are due from my side; I do not know when I have spent such a pleasant time. It was great fun doing the “lions” of Corrington, which were quite unknown to me.’

‘Indeed, you do surprise me! You seemed a perfect mine of information about everything relating to the town, and fully qualified to write a guide-book on the subject.’

‘Yes,’ he returned complacently, ‘I think I made the most of my knowledge, and did my fair share of talking to-day.’

‘Certainly you did,’ I replied dryly.

‘I wonder how Mr. Spinks enjoyed himself,’ he said mischievously. ‘We must have changed the programme he had marked out for his afternoon’s amusement’; and then he laughed heartily at the thought of his discomfiture. Recovering himself, he remarked, ‘I wonder how those two sensible women can endure him. But here we are at Beechfield.’

It was nearly seven o’clock, so I went upstairs to dress. Whilst thus engaged, my thoughts recurred persistently to the man I had just left, and I wondered what motive now made him seek my society. I could not help noticing the interest he seemed to take in anything I did, so that frequently when I had looked up suddenly I had found his eyes fixed intently upon me. The more I thought about him, only the more bewildered did I become.

During dinner we gave a full account of all we had done and seen. George and Christine were greatly amused to learn who had been our companions, for Mrs. Greenhall was as well known to them as to me. Greatly to my relief, Mr. Arnold said nothing about Mr. Spinks and his attentions.

The next day was the Sabbath, and nothing of moment occurred until I was preparing for evening service. Whilst I was putting on my hat I heard great drops of rain beating heavily against the window-panes, and as I re-entered the drawing-room I caught the following fragments of sentences spoken in low, earnest tones by Mr. Arnold: ‘Dreadful cough,’ ‘Never takes the slightest care,’ ‘Most unsuitable night.’ Christine came forward, and, looking anxiously at me, said in a deprecating way, ‘Surely, Kate, you are not thinking of going out in weather like this? It is not fit for you

with your cough, and it is too late now to order the carriage.'

I was piqued at Mr. Arnold's interference, for I knew it would never have occurred to Christine's unaided judgement to keep me at home. So I answered decidedly, 'Why not? I never stay in because of the weather.'

'You ought to make an exception to-night, Kate. You have been out twice already, and you are looking tired.' It was George who spoke, and he added, 'If you insist on going, my wife and I will remain at home. It is quite time you got rid of that wretched cough.'

It was useless arguing with George when his mind was made up, so I yielded. However, my anger was rising against Mr. Arnold, whom I held responsible for the incident, and as soon as Christine and her husband had left the room I said, with polite sarcasm, 'It is exceedingly thoughtful of you to take such an interest in my health; but in the future please leave my concerns to me.'

'But you are throwing your health away. Are you aware that you are only a shadow of your former self?' he added apologetically.

'Really,' I retorted, 'you have undertaken a gigantic task if you are going to lecture every lady who seems to lack discretion.'

'I only ask that you would take a little care of yourself,' he answered. There was a noticeable break in his voice, and it made me look up at him.

Was it possible after all, I thought, that this man really cared for me? Had there been some great mistake? Possibly he had loved me, and did still. I trembled as I thought that in this case I could pardon

his interference only too easily. How my heart throbbed at the possibility !

‘It is nothing short of torture to me,’ he said slowly, ‘this indifference to health on your part.’

As he spoke, my foolish heart turned traitor to prudence, and in a wild tumult of joy it whispered, ‘Oh, he loves you ! I know he does !’ Then the past rose before me, and another voice seemed to speak : ‘You are just as credulous as ever ; you have learned nothing from your humiliating experiences. These are the same eyes and voice that deceived you at Silcote.’ Swayed hither and thither by these conflicting emotions, I remained silent ; nor did my companion make any further attempt at conversation, but stood wrapped in gloomy thought.

Suddenly George’s voice was heard calling, ‘Arnold, where are you ? It is quite time we were off.’

Mr. Arnold started like one roused from sleep, and with a hurried ‘good-evening’ he left me.

When the outer door had closed upon them and the house was still, I tried to think dispassionately of all he had said and done since he came to Beechfield. Would that I had not remembered that story of the girl whom he had loved, and whose image haunted him yet. It made me forget his ardent looks and the spell of his personality, and I vowed once more to avoid him more than ever.

Alas for my plans ! George and Christine did all in their power to throw us together. However, I was unvaryingly cold in my manner toward him ; but it seemed to have no effect, for he now sought me as persistently as before he had avoided me.

So matters went on until one evening when we were talking of the curious changes wrought in character by

illness, and I gratefully remembered the attack of typhoid which Charlie had suffered, with its beneficent result. As my thoughts were wandering thus, Christine remarked, 'Kate, do you remember that bad illness you had when you were eighteen? You went to stay at Silcote, and I shall never forget the surprise I experienced when we met again. You were so strangely altered.'

The hot blood rushed to my face as she spoke, for Mr. Arnold was listening with rapt attention, and I tried to silence her by saying hastily, 'Christine, I wish you would find some one else to illustrate your theories.'

'If Miss Leigh will forgive me,' said Mr. Arnold intently, 'I would like to ask you, Mrs. Munro, in what way your friend was changed?'

Christine hesitated, for she realized that this was more than surface talk. However, as I seemed absorbed in my work, she replied rather lamely, 'Perhaps I have made too much of it, but I fancied she went away a light-hearted girl and returned a sober woman.'

'Yes,' said Mr. Arnold, after a long pause, 'I should say that was a decided change.' Then, turning to me: 'You dislike personal allusions, so will you change the subject by singing two old favourite songs for me again?' There was a marked emphasis on the word *again*. As we went towards the piano he said, in a tone of strange intensity, 'It is seven years since you sang those songs for me, and I have never heard them since without a bitter pang.'

His whole manner and tone transported me like a dream to the old-fashioned parlour at the farm where long ago he vowed his love to me. The remembrance unnerved me; my voice was unsteady, and I all but

stopped after a few bars of 'Softly Sighs.' Then my cough troubled me, and I had to stop.

My companion instantly rose, and, closing the piano, he said, in a voice that spoke to my heart, 'Don't attempt another note; it was selfish of me to bring on that cough again.'

Our eyes met as I rose—met in a long, penetrating look; then my sight became blurred. I was conscious that the grey eyes looking into mine spoke of a boundless love. They had read something too in mine, for he heaved a great sigh of relief, and joy seemed to light up his countenance like the sun gleaming across the silver sea.

It was useless pretending to hold out any longer I had succumbed entirely. I loved him! aye, and my heart confessed that it had always loved him. I knew too that I must love him to the end, come what might, weal or woe.

When he had bidden me good-night and I was alone my happiness seemed to overwhelm me just as it had done years ago. What did it matter to me that there was a mysterious break of seven years to be explained! I felt that he could and would explain it. And my heart would throb to the old refrain, 'I love my love, and my love loves me!'

CHAPTER XXIV

AFTER SEVEN YEARS

IT was in a chastened frame of mind that I entered the breakfast-room next morning. A feeling of suspense had fastened upon me directly I awoke. Would the renewed confidence I had placed in Mr. Arnold's affection prove once again a delusion?

He was there alone, standing near the door in an expectant attitude, and when he saw me there was such a frank confession of delight in his face that my fears were completely set at rest.

Never had I felt the charm of his presence so strongly; there seemed such an exuberance of life and spirits about him, while his look, figure, bearing, all combined to render him—in my eyes at least—irresistible. My heart swelled with pride to think that this man was indeed my lover.

Scarcely had we exchanged our customary morning greetings when George came into the room alone, and, apologizing for his wife's absence on the ground of a severe headache, he invited me to take her place at the head of the table. Shortly, the maid entered with the letters, and as usual our host distributed them. Besides his own there were three for Mr. Arnold and a large well-filled envelope for me, which I saw at a glance was from Charlie. George was the first to finish reading his

letters, and, common courtesy seeming to demand that some notice should be taken of my unmistakable foreign package, he said formally, 'I see, Kate, you have news from Australia, no doubt from Mr. Westbrook. I trust it is good news, and that his health has benefited by the voyage?'

I knew I was addressing an unsympathetic auditor, but my heart was so full of happiness that I could not help answering excitedly, 'Yes, indeed, and I am nearly beside myself with joy, for he not only writes that he never felt better in his life, but that he will be home almost as soon as this letter reaches me. Oh, it does seem an age since he went, and how I have borne the separation I hardly know!'

'It has been a trying time for you,' he replied, in a more cordial tone of voice, 'for I know that nothing but a strong sense of duty to your grandmother, Mrs. Leigh, prevented your going out with him when he was so ill.'

I was about to reply when Mr. Arnold prevented me by saying, in a hard voice, 'Munro, I find I have to return to town immediately; I must go and pack my things.'

'My dear fellow, whatever is the matter? Have you had bad news?'

'Yes, very bad news,' he answered, with a marked effort, rising from his chair as he spoke.

'But, Leslie, why bother about your luggage when you will be back here so shortly?'

'I shall not be coming back,' he answered. Then, without casting a glance in my direction, he crushed his letters together in his hand and left the room.

'I wonder whatever is up!' ejaculated George, as he followed him out.

I sat at the breakfast table dumbfounded. What terrible news could Mr. Arnold have received which had turned his face to such a death-like pallor and made him look older by years, so unlike the man full of vivacity and abounding contentment to whom I had been talking scarce ten minutes ago? Apparently the shock of the bad news had rendered him for the time being oblivious of my presence; but I comforted myself with the thought that he would come and bid me good-bye before he left, so I sat on, expecting him every moment to re-enter the room.

I waited, but he did not come. The dogcart drove up to the door, and the usual bustle attendant on George's departure followed. Still my lover did not come.

Then I heard the carriage drive away, and I sprang to the window just in time to catch a glimpse of Mr. Arnold sitting in it as it swiftly rolled down the avenue and disappeared from view.

An acute pain, physical as well as mental, attacked me as I realized that my recreant lover had again deserted me; for surely true love could not have gone without saying a word. It seemed to me that I was but a toy with which he amused himself when he had nothing better on hand, and which he flung carelessly aside when other interests prevailed. In a very agony of soul I cried out, 'Oh, what shall I do! What shall I do! My heart will break!' and like a poor wounded animal I crept away to hide myself from every human eye.

It was a dull, raw morning towards the end of September, and during the past night the rain had fallen in torrents. It was fine now, but the paths looked wet and slippery, and the rising wind howled dismally,

causing a melancholy creaking amongst the branches of the trees as they beat against each other, shaking down multitudes of dead leaves, which a sudden gust would sweep before it. But the desolate morning suited my desolate self. I could not breathe in the house, so, taking the first shawl I could find in the hall, I threw it hastily over me, and rushed out into the open air.

At the bottom of the garden, surrounded by trees, there stood an old-fashioned, musty summer-house. I hastened thither, and having closed the door on its rusty hinges I sat down on a wooden bench and endeavoured to think calmly over all that had happened.

Alas! I could only grasp the fact that once more I had been wantonly betrayed, and that my heart cried out passionately for my lost lover. Was I never to see him again, traitor though he was? Was I never again to hear his voice? Even the poignant degradation I felt at my repeated folly was swallowed up in such a sense of utter loss as positively numbed me. Weeping might have relieved this agonizing tension of mind, but my tears would not come, and I sat there in a state of stony despair.

Then a kind of lethargy stole over me, caused in part by the dank air, which chilled me to the bone. I noticed, however, that hurried footsteps seemed to approach the summer-house, then died away. Once again they returned, and this time the sound grew louder and more distinct, until they turned up the little path that led to my retreat. The door opened, and Mr. Arnold, with grim countenance, stood before me.

At first I felt neither surprise nor pleasure at his unexpected appearance, but gradually my torpid brain began to realize that for some reason or other he was angry with me.

But the condition in which he found me made him pause and ask abruptly, 'What has happened to you? You look fearfully ill. Whatever brought you to this vile hole?'

'Indeed, I am not ill,' I replied faintly.

'Not ill. Am I to doubt the evidence of my senses?' Then his eye fell on Charlie's letter, which had slipped from my grasp and lay unheeded on the floor. His face grew darker than ever, and, losing all self-command, he said bitterly, 'You seemed deliriously happy at breakfast. Has that fellow Westbrook written anything which has caused this state of things?'

'That fellow?' I gasped forth in surprise.

'Yes, that fellow!' he repeated, his face white with passion; 'that man Westbrook, who has so fatally wrecked my happiness! But forgive me—I do not wish to tyrannize; I will wait.'

I sadly needed time to collect my thoughts, for how Charlie could have wrecked his happiness I did not know.

After standing at a distance for a while he drew near to me. His face had a set look about it, and there was agony in his dark eyes as he said, in a voice intended to be coldly ironical, 'Miss Leigh, I see you are looking almost yourself again, so I will venture to detain you on my own account a few minutes longer. It is right that you should know how well you have succeeded in torturing a poor trustful fool. It is not essential to your happiness to be surrounded by a crowd of adorers; your affections are securely placed, and one poor wretch in addition to experiment upon completely satisfies you. You have done me the honour of singling me out as the victim of your fascinations, and no doubt your heart will swell with pride when I tell you your success is absolute.

One moment, please,' he exclaimed, when I would have uttered a word. 'From the day I fled from you at Silcote, you will be glad to learn your memory has embittered my existence, and these last weeks in which I have been thrown constantly in your society will make life more unendurable than ever. Hate you I cannot; forget you I cannot. Ah!' he cried out passionately, 'my false love, who deluded me by appearing the sweetest woman that ever walked this earth, are you all a sham?' Then, overcome with the tumult of these conflicting feelings, he leant against the window-sill and buried his face in his hands.

'What have I done? Or what can you imagine I have done, that you should speak so cruelly to me?' I cried, now that he gave me the opportunity.

'Done!' he echoed scornfully; 'nothing that you would be ashamed of according to your code of honour! You allow one lover after another to kiss you unchidden! To you such an incident is a mere trifle not worth remembering, but that trifle has scorched itself indelibly on my heart and memory, and blasted my happiness.' This he uttered savagely.

'As you believe me capable of such conduct, go from my presence this moment!' I replied, flushing with shame. 'You, of all people, do well to bring such charges against me! You, who vowed solemnly you loved me, and then deserted me without one word of explanation or farewell!'

'What!' he cried in amazement, 'you charge me with deserting you? You, whom I saw fling yourself with rapturous abandonment into the arms of young Westbrook! And only this morning you made no attempt to conceal your unfeigned delight at his speedy return to England!'

‘And why should I conceal it?’ I asked.

‘Why should you?’ he returned hotly. ‘Let me tell you I will never go shares with any man in your love!’

‘Do you mean,’ I demanded in blank surprise, ‘that I am to renounce all natural affection for my brother—or young Westbrook as you please to term him?’

‘Brother!’ he retorted, ‘I suppose an adopted one, or some such nonsense! I heard to-day that he had been dangerously ill, yet all this time at Beechfield neither you nor the Munros have ever mentioned his name.’

Then at last flashed upon me the fatal mistake he had made that day at Silcote, and everything became clear in an instant. But the overwhelming joy I felt at this lifting of the veil of mystery rendered me incapable of doing more than point to Charlie’s letter lying on the ground, and saying faintly, ‘Read that; it explains everything.’

He bent down, half-lifted the letter, then dropped it again. ‘No,’ he said, ‘I cannot read a letter of his to you.’

With some effort I stooped, picked up the letter, turned to the last page, and read: ‘From your loving brother, Charles L. Westbrook.’

‘Will you not understand,’ I implored, ‘that he is the son of my own father and mother, and only took the name of Westbrook a few years ago, and that the reason his name is not mentioned at Beechfield is that the Munros do not like him?’

Now, for the first time, Mr. Arnold perceived the grievous error into which he had been betrayed. The flush of rage left his face and was succeeded by a deadly pallor. A look of unutterable shame came into his eyes,

and for some moments he could not speak. Then he gasped, 'Oh, Kate, my love, my only love, what a fool I have been! Can you ever forgive me? Can you ever pardon my cruel insulting words? I deserve to lose you, that I do!'

While he spoke the hot blood rushed to my cheeks. I tried in vain to speak; all that I did was to look into his eyes and stretch out my arms feebly. It was sufficient, and with a cry such as a mother gives when she finds her lost child, he drew me to him and clasped me in his arms.

I clung to him, as if fearing in this supreme moment of bliss we might yet be torn asunder. After a minute or two of silent rapture I became conscious of a feeling of jealousy that had been steadily growing upon me during the last few days, and I knew that before I could absolutely trust his affection he must answer one question to my entire satisfaction. So, half withdrawing myself from his embrace, I said, 'It is very strange that you say I am the only woman you have ever loved. How can that be? I have not forgotten the romantic story you told George and Christine of that beautiful girl you fell madly in love with, who turned out a fraud.'

My lover looked at me in surprise; then suddenly laughed and exclaimed, 'Ah, I had forgotten that you also could be as dense and blind as myself. Child! do you not understand that the beautiful girl with whom you rightly say I fell so madly in love was you yourself, darling? But it is agonizing to hear you say that I thought you a fraud—and the more so because I cannot deny it.'

'Never shall I forget that last day at Silcote. I was walking up the road to the farmhouse after lunch to

keep my appointment with you, and had nearly reached it, feeling radiantly happy, when a carriage slowly drove past me up the hilly ascent. Seated inside it was a refined-looking, handsome fellow, who did not resemble you in the least, either in feature or expression. He was evidently of the world, worldly. I admit that you had told me you had one brother, a lad of nineteen, who had gone with a reading-party to Switzerland, but this man looked far more than nineteen. I noticed his luggage was labelled C. L. Westbrook, and that also helped fatally to mislead me. By the time the carriage stopped I had nearly reached the gate, and could see you standing not far from it. The stranger sprang out and rushed eagerly into the garden, when, to my dismay, I beheld you dart forward and fling yourself into his outstretched arms ; whereupon he kissed you again and again. You had spoken of obstacles that morning, and in my foolishness I jumped headlong to the conclusion that he was the obstacle. Scarcely knowing what I did, I fled at once from the hateful spot where I had witnessed your supposed perfidy, and wandered about for hours, until, worn out with fatigue, I returned to the inn, where the first person I saw as I entered was my rival standing in the hall.

‘I asked the waiter if he knew whether this Mr. Westbrook intended making any stay in the neighbourhood.

‘The man replied that he had engaged rooms at the hotel for a week, so in bitterness of spirit and foolish haste I quitted Silcote early next morning. And to think that to-day I nearly repeated the same error drives me almost distracted !

‘When I first arrived at Beechfield and found you staying here, my one idea was to leave as speedily as

possible. Then, when you entered the drawing-room, looking fragile, but so lovely in your white gown, with a cluster of red roses fastened in your belt, and your face wearing the sweet innocent expression I knew so well, I tell you my heart died within me. But I remembered that the last time I had seen you was in the embrace of that stranger; and a storm of jealousy, with a dread of your fascination, swept over me, so that I hardly knew what I was doing. When I regained the full use of my senses I discovered that I had cut you dead, and that you had quietly and unconcernedly accepted my cut. I have already told you how that my sole desire was to flee from Beechfield as I had done from Silcote, but I found this was impossible unless I quarrelled with my host, so I submitted sullenly to my fate, and a very hard fate it appeared to me.

‘Next came that episode in the drawing-room, when you were an unseen listener to my unfortunate love-story, and I discovered to my great surprise that you had not the slightest idea you were its heroine, for you looked into my face with real pity, and told me in such a pretty, deprecating way that I need not be afraid: women could keep a secret, and mine was safe with you.

‘I confess I was fairly bowled over, and from that moment I flung distrust to the winds, and determined to do my utmost to win you for my wife. The strain has been frightful, for day and night I have pondered over the significance of your every word and look; but, ponder as I might, I could arrive at no definite conclusion. At one time I hoped, at another I despaired; until last evening I felt I had good reason to believe that I had succeeded in gaining your affections. But when this morning brought with it the utter downfall of

my hopes, the very life seemed crushed out of me. Hence my flight from Beechfield.

‘But as I drove into town a fierce revulsion of feeling set in, and I determined to return and upbraid you to your face for your cruelty. What a mercy I made the resolve!’ Once more he drew me to him in a strong embrace.

Able now to dwell upon Charlie’s letter, he asked anxiously whether it contained bad news.

‘No,’ I replied.

‘Then why did I find you sitting here in the damp, the very picture of abject despair?’

‘Oh, you obtuse creature!’ I exclaimed, ‘you were the cause of it, not Charlie!’

‘Dear,’ he whispered, ‘I haven’t deserved to be so loved. I thank God for it!’ And he sought to remedy the sorrow he had wrought me in just the way his heart prompted; nor was my heart averse.

CHAPTER XXV

ANOTHER MYSTERY SOLVED

WE were suddenly recalled to mundane things by a very practical sound. The gong, which had evidently been brought in desperation to the front door, rang loudly and yet more loudly through the garden.

We looked at each other guiltily ; then my companion drew out his watch and exclaimed, ' Good gracious ! it is twenty to two, and luncheon is at one o'clock ! '

' We must go at once,' I exclaimed.

' We must, dear,' he replied, rising from his seat ; ' but I scarcely know how to tear myself from this delightful spot.'

' Why, it is scarcely an hour ago since you called it a vile hole—Leslie.' I paused shyly, despite my smiles, over his name.

' Did I ? How mistaken one may be ! ' he replied, as he opened the creaking door. ' Why, it is pouring with rain ! Kate, dear, will you wait while I fetch you a cloak and umbrella ? '

' Oh, no,' I protested, ' a little rain won't harm me, and I have my shawl.'

So we sallied forth, laughing heartily as we splashed through the puddles of muddy water. As we emerged from the narrow path leading to the hut, we saw George coming towards us with two umbrellas under his arm.

His face wore a half-amused look as he remarked,

'So you have deigned to put in an appearance at last. Are you really on your way to the house?' And he handed one of the umbrellas to his friend, opening the other for me.

'Thanks, George, one is enough,' said Leslie dryly; 'I can shelter Kate under mine.'

'Ah!' exclaimed Munro, quick to realize the state of affairs; 'I wish you joy with all my heart, and you too, Kate. I cannot say I am altogether overcome by surprise, nor will Christine be. But I will hurry up and tell her the good news.'

Off he went, more like a lad than I had seen him. We followed, arm in arm, under one umbrella, as we had done before on that rainy Sabbath long ago.

Christine met us at the door, her face beaming with smiles as she cried, 'Come in, you dear people. Oh, this is simply delightful! I have longed for it all the time,' and she embraced me, damp as I was.

'Kate!' she exclaimed reprovingly, 'go at once and take off your wet things. We will begin luncheon if you don't mind. Lovers may not be susceptible to the pangs of hunger, but George and I are perfectly famished.'

When I joined them a little later, Christine observed, half in jest, 'Well, you are two deceivers, and no mistake! Mr. Arnold tells me you are old acquaintances, and knew each other well in Silcote!'

'My dear Mrs. Munro,' interposed my lover, 'I don't think we deserve that epithet. May I tell you our story?'

'Please do, this very moment, for I am devoured by curiosity, and I am sure George is too.'

Then Leslie related how at first sight he had fallen desperately in love with me, how fortuitous circumstances

had aided him in making my acquaintance, how he had done his best to win my affection, and how his hopes had been dashed to the ground by the sudden appearance, as he supposed, of a more favoured suitor, causing his flight from Silcote in despair. 'Yes,' he concluded, appealing to the Munros; 'you both know Mr. Westbrook. Can you possibly conceive of a more formidable rival? That summer afternoon, when he sprang from the carriage and rushed towards Kate, his personality so appealed to me that it seemed impossible that a woman who had once loved him could ever change; and any hope I might have cherished of regaining her affection vanished. Are you surprised?'

He waited for a reply to his question, but none came. Christine had never a word to utter. I glanced at her, and saw that her face had flushed a deep red, even to the roots of her hair, and that her eyes, fixed on her husband's face, were sparkling dangerously. I noticed, too, that George looked so cowed and miserable that I had never seen him appear to less advantage.

Perceiving that something was amiss, Leslie rose from the table, remarking courteously, 'Mrs. Munro, will you be so good as to excuse me? I have important letters to attend to, which will take me about an hour, I am afraid.' Then, turning to me, he said, 'Kate, dear, shall I find you in the drawing-room when I have finished?'

'Yes,' I replied simply.

'I, too, have letters to write,' George remarked, and immediately followed his friend out of the room.

I saw that Christine was dreadfully agitated, her breast heaved with suppressed emotion, and then all at once she burst into a paroxysm of tears.

'Oh, what is the matter, my darling?' I inquired,

putting my arms around her, while I tried to soothe her to the utmost of my power.

She could not reply for some minutes, but at length she murmured, 'I must speak; I can hold my peace no longer. You cannot imagine, Kate, all that I have endured these last five years. Oh, how I envy you and Leslie your secure happiness! No past will ever trouble you; but for me,' she cried wildly, 'how different! I can never get away from it; it haunts my very existence!'

While she was speaking, to my dismay I saw George had re-entered the room unperceived by his wife. He had heard her last remark, and his face became rigid as though carved in stone, while his eyes dilated in a manner I cannot describe. I was just going to speak when he held up his hand with a gesture which compelled me to silence. I trembled all over, fearing that these two forlorn creatures were about to make a final and absolute wreck of their happiness. 'Yes, Kate,' she continued, in despairing tones, 'I must give voice to my agony. You know, though I have never spoken to you on the subject, how in years gone by I cared for Charlie.'

'Oh, hush!' I said, but again George menacingly held up his hand, while his wife, carried away by the force of her long pent-up passion, never heeded my exclamation, but went on:

'You are aware how it all ended, and I was only too thankful to quit Charnham. At Waring Green I was thrown constantly with George, who, I knew, had always loved me, and slowly but surely he gained my affection; while the girlish fancy I had cherished for a pretty boy died out entirely. When I married George I loved him with a deep, true love.' As she uttered these words George's countenance became suffused with a strange

radiance. Christine, however, still unconscious of his presence, continued: 'Yes, and after our marriage he became, if possible, still dearer to me; but when I was thus happy and secure, as I thought, in our mutual affection, he stabbed me to the heart. It was the most distressing of a long series of miserable days, that one on which I received your letter telling me of Mrs. Westbrook's death, and of the religious change that had taken place in Charlie. I was overjoyed for your sake, and I do not for one moment pretend that I was not equally gratified for my old playmate's sake, too; so that, when George inquired what made me look so excited and pleased, I handed him your letter, without the faintest suspicion of his real feelings, and replied, "Read, and you will see!"

'He took it eagerly, scanned its contents, then turned on me coldly and said, "So this is the cause of your tumultuous gladness? Westbrook becoming a saint! I wonder that you trust yourself to let me see how dear he still is to you. But recollect, madam, your position: the law makes you my wife, and in order to protect myself I henceforth forbid all further correspondence with that man's sister."

'My very heart seemed to stop beating; however, I managed to reply hastily, "Be it so. But understand, that from this moment I will never permit you to utter Mr. Westbrook's name to me."

'From that fatal moment the happy confidence that had existed between us entirely departed. True, after his fit of passion was over he relented as regards you, but the iron had entered into my soul and I treated his concession with indifference. Now you will understand, Kate, why I ceased writing to you, and why I have never allowed your brother's name to be mentioned.

However, I must confess that, when I heard of Mrs. Leigh's death, and knew also that your brother had gone on a long voyage for his health, my pride gave way. Then George timidly proposed that you should be invited to Beechfield, and I made no demur. The same day I wrote and entreated you to pay us a visit. At first your arrival seemed to bring back vividly all the degrading past; I was intensely wretched, and suffered more than words can tell. Oh, the ignominy in being suspected by my husband of caring for another man, when my heart and soul were absolutely his!'

Again her feelings overcame her, but at this time it was not I who consoled her, for in astonishment she felt her husband's arms close round her, and it was his words, full of bitter regret that sounded in her ears: 'Oh, wife! what a brute I have been! Forgive me, dear, for all these years of jealousy towards Charlie. But if even Leslie Arnold despaired of success when he thought Westbrook his rival, how much more a poor stupid fellow like me!'

'Perhaps you were stupid,' said Christine softly, as she smiled through her tears, and, with the light of tender love shining in her eyes, put her hands caressingly over her husband's mouth to stay his further speech, 'not to see that my heart was so full of you that there wasn't the tiniest corner left for any one else. Oh, love, trust me entirely, or my heart will break! What care I about any one else? You are all in all to me, the dearest being in existence. Charlie, indeed! You never wasted your early years. . . .'

I had heard enough. Christine had become oblivious to my presence, so I slipped away, delighted beyond measure at the turn events had taken.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE LAST OF THE OLD NEST

ONLY a day or two after I became engaged to Leslie a telegram reached me from Charlie. He would be in London in a few hours, and I had but a very short time to race up to town and reach his hotel ere he arrived. How well he looked—sunburnt, and handsomer than ever, a very picture of health and spirits!

When I told him of my engagement to a man to whom he had never heard me allude, his amazement was great. But when Leslie called later in the evening the matter was all right so far as Charlie's approval was concerned, for they took to one another immediately. In an hour they were even smiling over their unfortunate meeting at Silcote.

I was not so engrossed in my own joy as to forget Alicia, and, directly Charlie and I were alone, I told him of her changed views of life and of her continued love for him.

How the love-light shone in his eyes as he sprang up in his boyish fashion and caught me in his arms, exclaiming, 'My best of sisters! you have banished the only sorrow I had; for to tell the truth I was feeling a bit out in the cold somehow, now that Leslie has taken possession of your affection.'

Charlie rushed off to see Alicia early the next morn-

ing, and with her parents' full consent they were formally engaged. The action of the Spencers was not inconsistent with their pride. The poor little Westbrook baby had died, the wild Earl of Wallington was now a decrepit and feeble old man; hence Charlie was heir apparent to the title, and the Spencers were delighted. They even consented without demur to the wedding taking place in our little chapel, in conjunction with Leslie's and mine.

But if Alicia's parents were willing that their daughter should be married in the little meeting-house, Mr. Munro and those who shared his opinions were not of the same mind. They did their utmost to prevent it, on the ground that none of us were in fellowship with them. However, Mr. Edmondson stepped into the breach and informed his over-zealous deacons that the veriest outsiders were married there, and that he could not recognize anybody's right to oppose. This settled all further opposition from that particular quarter.

But, to our consternation, we found trouble elsewhere. It happened in this wise: Charlie and I, in a happy state of mind, repaired to the vicarage to invite our old friend Dr. Brown to the wedding breakfast. It never entered our heads that he might take umbrage at the ceremony being performed in the chapel, since he had always accepted the fact that we were Nonconformists. But when he learned that Alicia, a baptized and confirmed child of his beloved Church, was going to be married in a conventicle by an unconsecrated minister, he gave way to an ungovernable fit of wrath. He railed at us, at the Spencers, and above all at poor Mr. Edmondson, who deserved it least of all. That he, no priest at all, should dare to profane the Holy Sacrament of Marriage was an abomination indeed; he

considered it was an insult to his cloth, and an act of unparalleled audacity on our part to ask him to countenance such unhallowed proceedings.

Charlie and I were dumb with astonishment ; for, if there was one person in the world whom we had loved from our childhood upwards, it was the old man who now stood before us. In silence we turned to go, but as I cast a parting glance at our friend I saw big tears standing in his eyes, and before I knew what I was doing I had flung my arms around his neck and kissed him.

Half angrily he shook me off, then suddenly his mood changed. Drawing me towards him, he held out his hand to Charlie, saying, ' Ah, children ! you have hit me harder this time than when I first made your acquaintance and you threw those wretched crab-apples in my face. But my heart has turned traitor within me ; I must forgive you both.'

' Oh, if so,' I cried, ' will you not come to our wedding breakfast ? You, who were grandfather's closest friend—we shall feel so dreadfully unhappy if you stay away ! '

He did not reply at once. Conflicting emotions were plainly visible on his face as he muttered something about being bitterly disappointed, for he had hoped to marry Charlie himself. Then a smile lit up his countenance as he said, ' Well, children, after all, it isn't your fault that affairs are in this sad condition ; the blame lies with my beloved but mistaken friend, Dr. Leigh. Still, much as I love you both, I will not sit down at table with that layman-minister, or minister-layman, who will play the most prominent part on this occasion. However, after the breakfast is over, I will come and give you an old man's blessing before you bid farewell to Charnham.' Then, as he looked searchingly at me with his kind eyes, he burst out impulsively, ' But, dear,

you are still troubled? And you, my dear lad? Spoiling your wedding-day, am I? Nay, I would rather sacrifice my own feelings. After all, you may expect me to the breakfast. Yes'—this with a wry face—'I will even sit down to table with Edmondson.'

'Oh, no!' we cried simultaneously; and Charlie, grasping his hand warmly, added, 'Sir, on no account would we have you do violence to your scruples. I know I am expressing Katie's wishes as well as my own, when I say that we shall be perfectly contented if you will say good-bye to us before we leave our old home.'

'Will that really content you?' he queried.

'Yes, absolutely,' we answered; and thus the matter was settled.

Most of the inhabitants in the town and neighbourhood were delighted with the forthcoming event, and evinced the keenest interest. We were, of course, Dr. Leigh's grandchildren, and his memory was still fragrant amongst them. Moreover, the news had spread abroad that my brother would eventually become the Earl of Wallington, and that he was marrying a great beauty and an heiress. Later on, when it leaked out that a real lord would be present—for Colonel Mowbray, now Lord Stourton, had insisted on making one of the wedding guests—public enthusiasm reached its climax. But why dwell upon all the thousand and one things that disturbed the quiet of the ensuing days—of Leslie's supreme indifference as to the shade and style of my gowns, Alicia receiving even less assistance from Charlie; of my lover's ridiculous suggestion that we should get a special licence, that I should put on just my ordinary hat and gown to be married in, and that we should return from our honeymoon in time for Charlie's wedding?

However, there are the memories of one particular evening hour that I would recall. It was on the eve of our wedding day. Charlie and I had stolen away from the bustle below up to our old nursery. We entered to find the room in darkness, and having groped our way toward the window which overlooked the river, we squeezed ourselves into the seat there and sat watching the moonlit waters, dotted with small ships with their twinkling lights of varied shade, their hulls and masts mingling with the shadows so as to produce a weird, spectral effect.

Sitting thus amid the changing light and shifting shadows, we spoke in softened accents of our beloved grandparents, and of their saintly lives. It seemed almost as though their presence was still there, pregnant with the old guardianship and inspiration. No wonder that our feelings were stirred, for what love had they not lavished on the two helpless orphans committed to their charge !

Then, though I would fain have silenced him, Charlie took to dwelling on his wasted opportunities and dissipated years at Westbrook.

It grieved me sorely to hear him speak in this way ; for, whatever his past might have been, I knew that he had come forth as gold refined. So I remonstrated : ' Yes, dear, it is sad to think of those lost years ; but since then God has greatly blessed you in your work both here and in London, and I am sure that when you reach India '—Charlie intended going there for some years as a medical missionary—' He will continue to bless you abundantly. He has done so already in giving you such a wife as Alicia.'

' Indeed He has ! and I know full well how unworthy I am. If being forgiven much means loving much, no

one ought to surpass me in love and devotion to my Saviour.'

'Yes,' I cried in response, 'and I too have been forgiven much!' Then, moved by a common impulse, we slipped off the window seat and knelt down hand in hand as we had done often in the old childish days, while Charlie prayed that we might prove loyal and devoted servants. We prayed too that Alicia and Leslie might share in the same blessing.

Rising from our knees, we gazed in silence for a moment or two on the river with its many associations. Then Charlie, putting his hand on my shoulder, said, 'Little sister, I love Alicia dearly, as you know, and I do not grudge one little bit giving you to Leslie, who is worthy of you ; more than which I cannot say in his praise. But I find it terribly hard to say good-bye to the old home, and to my only sister, whom I have loved through all. Think of the happy games we played together in this very room ! As for these later years, how much do I not owe to your love and devotion !'

'Oh, Charlie!' I exclaimed, clinging to him, 'you have been even more to me.' Then my feelings had their way and I wept.

'Katie, this will never do !' he exclaimed remorsefully ; 'you must stop crying, or I shall be making an ass of myself. What would Leslie say if he saw you with reddened eyelids and white cheeks to-morrow ? Dearest, we must go to face the future as brave hearts should.'

We clung together in a brief embrace, but as I descended the stairs to my bedroom I was conscious of an aching heart at the thought of leaving my beloved brother. Throughout the night the pain never left me, and when I awoke on the eventful morning, it still re-

mained, in spite of the glorious sunshine that greeted me. It was present with me as Charlie and I drove together through the narrow crowded streets to the chapel, and even as I walked up the aisle and took my place before the communion table.

But some one came swiftly to my side. I turned to find Leslie's eyes, full of a great love, fixed upon me, and then at last my pain vanished. Joy and peace now filled my breast, and those ancient words came thrilling through my soul: 'Hearken, O daughter, and consider, and incline thine ear; forget also thine own people and thy father's house.' Whereupon I forgot all else in the world but the man standing beside me.

A rustling sound served to recall me to my actual surroundings, and, looking up, I saw Alicia advancing towards us, leaning on her father's arm, a vision of radiant beauty. Charlie went forward to meet her, and in a moment they were standing beside us. Never, I thought, had I seen so lovely a pair, nor two more noble in the best sense of the word.

Mr. Edmondson's voice broke the silence which had now settled on the assembly, and the solemn service began. Curiously enough, I felt more like a spectator than one taking part in the ceremony, until I heard Leslie's voice making the necessary responses in clear, decided tones. Then my turn came; but only a faint, far-away voice, which somehow did not seem to be mine, repeated after Mr. Edmondson the prescribed formula.

The final hymn, the signing of the registers, congratulations, kisses, the strains of the Wedding March—all these passed like a confused dream, from which I awoke to find Leslie's hand in mine and our carriage rolling rapidly homeward.

‘At last you are mine, my darling, after all these years of miserable waiting!’ whispered an ardent voice in my ear. And, spectators in their crowds notwithstanding, my husband imprinted a kiss upon my brow.

The doings of the next hour left but a vague impression on my mind, save for one incident which I must mention.

As Alicia and I came into the hall ready to depart, we found Dr. Brown awaiting us. True to his promise, he had come to bid us farewell. He kissed us affectionately, and as Alicia left us he exclaimed, ‘What a magnificent woman she is!’ Then he turned to me as he added: ‘Yet you are the sweetest, bonniest bride I have seen, and I have had a vast experience. But’—with a shake of the head—‘I cannot pretend to be unbiassed, for ever since you pushed your fair, mischievous little face over the garden gate and pleaded to share your brother’s punishment, I have loved you, and I have gone on loving you more and more as the years rolled by. But I see Mrs. Munro beckons you, I must say good-bye. God bless you and yours! May He shower His choicest blessings upon you—such is your old friend’s prayer.’ And the dear old man turned away to hide the trembling of his lips.

We sped on our way, with a cloudless sky of azure above us, and bright sunshine all around. But it was no brighter than the inner brightness that flooded our whole being. So we bade farewell to Charnham, and the last sight that our eyes rested upon as we left the old nest was the group of tried, familiar friends gathered about the portals of Dr. Leigh’s old home.

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